Scott MacDonald

His African Journey

An Interview with Peter Kubelka

Since so much of alternative cinema is devoted to a critique of commercial media, those of us who are committed to exposing others to this complex history are often faced with the challenge of demonstrating that the alternative films we admire do more than refuse to offer audiences what conventional films offer them: they also provide experiences that are at least as valuable as those offered by the films they critique. Most alternative films are, to say the least, slowly acquired tastes, and films that are immediately recognizable as accomplished and powerful and interesting are the exceptions: there's Stan Brakhage's *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), of course, and Bruce Conner's *Cosmic Ray* (1962), and Su Friedrich's *Sink or Swim* (1990). . . . But the film that makes the single, most powerful case for the accomplishment of alternative film may be Peter Kubelka's *Unsere Afrikareise/Our African Journey* (1966).

Nearly forty years after it was completed, *Our African Journey* not only remains as powerful for first-time viewers as it has ever been, but it has also, recently, begun to be recognized by those who have little interest in its avant-garde status. A new generation of scholars/teachers reconsidering the history of documentary, and of ethnographic documentary especially, has correctly understood Kubelka's short (12 minutes) film as a significant contribution to our thinking about the cinematic representation of non-industrialized peoples and of Africa in particular. This new audience has discovered what audiences for avant-garde film have always recognized: that *Our African Journey* is one of the most powerful and insightful cinematic exposés of colonialism.

When Kubelka has discussed *Our African Journey* with audiences and when he has written about it (see his "The Theory of Metrical Film," in P. Adams

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Sitney's *The Avant-Garde Film: A Reader of Theory and Criticism* [New York: New York University Press, 1978], 157-58), his focus has been his formal strategy for interpreting the experience of traveling with the Austrian businessmen who hired him to document their African safari in 1961. Having spent years studying the images and sounds he recorded during the trip, Kubelka selected and edited them into a montage so that, to use Sergei Eisenstein's terminology, each image "collides" with the image that follows, each sound collides with the sound that follows, and each visual image collides with the sound that accompanies it. For Kubelka, the particular "essential" quality of cinema is that it allows the sound-image synchronization of real experience to be overcome. Because sound and image are recorded by different systems, the filmmaker has the option of reconstituting an illusion of the original synch event from the filmed image and the taped sound *or* of using artistry to explore the myriad possibilities of combining images with sounds that would not accompany them in reality.

Kubelka's commitment to using the essential formal options of cinema to fashion a cinematic art that can compete with the artistic accomplishments of music, painting, and literature has occasionally led commentators to wonder how fully aware he was/is of the implications of the subject matter of his films. Recently, for example, Catherine Russell has argued that *Our African Journey* "produces only . . . traces of guilt without a legible morality": "In the complete absence of voice-over or any other form of explanation, the imagery is radically decontextualized" (*Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999], 132, 129). I would argue that Kubelka's precise editing strategy recontextualizes the imagery he uses in the film so that we can hardly fail to read his indictment of the system of colonial exploitation that the Austrians unwittingly represent (exploitation in which Kubelka and his viewers are complicit: it's "our" African journey, after all). It is true, of course, that Kubelka's refusal of voiceover, and of any textual form of explanation/interpretation of what we see, places the onus/pleasure of interpreting the film with viewers, but it is partly Kubelka's faith in viewers that makes *Our African Journey* so impressive. Nevertheless, Russell's concerns made it clear to me that a conversation with Kubelka was overdue.

Our African Journey is the best-known film in a remarkable career—remarkable, in part, because of Kubelka's refusal to be "productive": between 1954 and 1977 he finished just six films that total less than an hour, and though he continues to identify himself as a filmmaker, he hasn't released a film since. Kubelka's early, "metric" films (for him, the base unit of cinema is not the shot but the frame, and he has explored the 24-frames-per-second "meter" of cinema in a variety of ways) are defiantly brief. *Adebar* (1957) is one and a half minutes, *Schwechater* (1958) one minute—though they both confront issues of how film represents/constructs images and meaning and how we process cinematic experience. *Arnulf Rainer* (1960) reduces film to fundamental elements: black and white, sound and silence, and duration; with Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* (1966) it is the most interesting and provocative of flicker films. *Our African Journey* is Kubelka's "epic," his travel film, and his deepest engagement with human characters. *Pausa!* (1977) is a collaboration with artist Arnulf Rainer, who performs with his face.

I had an opportunity to talk with Kubelka in October, 1999, when he was a visiting lecturer at Bard College. Since then, he and I have been in communication, fashioning our discussion into the interview that follows. We are grateful to P. Adams Sitney, who

Courtesy Peter Kubelka

From Peter Kubelka's visual and acoustical "Dictionaries" for *Our African Journey*: frames from sequentially numbered shots used by Kubelka in editing the film.

worked with Kubelka in Vienna during the summer of 2002 making final corrections to our interview.

MacDonald: I'm curious about the circumstances in which the material for Unsere Afrikareise *was recorded.*
Kubelka: There is nothing in the film that was not recorded during the trip. This is true of both image and sound. There was no mixing of sound, which means that when you hear music and spoken words at the same time, that was the way it happened. The music you hear in the film comes either from the car radio or was recorded live in the various locations. For example, the music played when the lion is hoisted up onto the car was recorded at a marriage in a very small town in Yugoslavia. We went through Yugoslavia in the Volkswagen bus that you see in the film. Originally, we left from Wels, which is the town where the Austrians who hired me to make the film lived.

How many people were on the trip altogether, and who, exactly, were they?
I'm wondering how much I should say about who they really were, because I don't want to bring them personally into play. I have often said that this film should not be thought of as a personal account of these special people; they represent a whole class. They were wealthy people who lived in a small town. They were not passionate hunters. Among Austrian business people, to be a hunter brings a certain prestige. You might start by paying to shoot deer in Austrian hunting reserves. Then you might upgrade and go to Poland, maybe, and shoot a bear. To upgrade from that, you would go to Africa or somewhere equally exotic. This is exactly what they did. Theirs was not really a trip of desire, but a reflection of a certain social structure, which makes it understandable that they didn't really want to travel. They didn't really want to see people different from themselves.

As soon as we got into Yugoslavia, they were already afraid of experiencing anything new. For example, they had brought packaged food with them; they were afraid of ordering good, interesting local food—they would rather open a can. The participants were the couple who had hired me; a friend of theirs, an architect, and his wife (the blonde woman with the big breasts you see in the boat); a person from a lower social class who had hunting experience, and me. In Africa two more German people, who had been in the army during the Second World War and then had emigrated to Africa, maybe for political reasons, joined us. They were two of those Europeans who keep the colonies running. One was the chief of electricity and chief of the mint in Sudan. When you hear me saying, "Goethe was an asshole," *he's* the one who says, "No!" and begins lecturing to me in a patronizing high-school-teacher know-it-all voice.

As to the trip, we went through Yugoslavia into Greece by bus, and in Athens we took a boat to Cairo.

Were you filming the whole way?
I was filming, but not very much. I had already made, in Yugoslavia, the very important shot at the end of the film where a woman walks through a snowy landscape, part of the coda of the film, which consists of three shots. There is the naked indigenous man with a spear and a piece of raw meat in his hands who walks though the image. Then you hear a motor noise and somebody says, in broken English, "I like to visit your country." Then I cut and, in silence, there *is* "my country" (in reality not Austria but Yugoslavia, but it doesn't matter because it's the same landscape and weather). Then you see the peasant woman, who looks just like the women in the country place where I grew up. "My country" is shown silent; then I cut again, and the indigenous man walks out of the image as he says, "If I find chance." This gives the whole film a complete turn, because you start to imagine what would happen if he had the chance and the means to come and do to *us* what *we* did to *them*!

My reaction is always that since he is naked, he would never be allowed to be himself in a European country.
But you could also imagine that Europe might fall into the kind of powerless state many indigenous Africans are in now. They can't keep us from going there. They can't say no. What I imagine is that he would have the power to come naked and impose *his* views on *us,* and be himself and hunt the chickens in our yard, and we would have to endure it. This is what "I'd like to visit your country" means to me.

Back to the route of the trip. We went through Egypt by boat from Cairo up the Nile to Aswan.

Where are the two minarets we see?
In Cairo, where we stayed several days. Then there was the trip on the Nile, and in Aswan we stopped again and then continued with the VW bus to Khartoum, where the two German government employees joined us. The hunters hired a big Mercedes truck with a Sudanese owner/chauffeur to carry all the trophies they hoped they would shoot. In fact, they did load the whole truck with dead animals, but since they hadn't prepared them in time, the bodies started to rot, and all of it was discarded, the whole stinking load.

In my film, I didn't *show* the worst things they did—for several reasons. I didn't want to make simply an anti-safari film, or a direct, obvious accusation. My method was to suggest ideas through the *editing*.

With the same material I could have made a travelogue that they would have liked.

What else was shot on the way to the hunting grounds?
Going down, I filmed only once in a while. I made some shots they ordered me to shoot. I was penniless, so I could not do just anything I wished to do. I was dependent on them to pay for my food.

They bought the film?
They bought the film and the camera. I had nothing. Of course, they let me feel this every day, and by the time we arrived in the Sudan, the relationship was already unpleasant. I was disgusted with the way they behaved. We were having all these new experiences, and I was very excited to be there. I admired all these things that *they* despised, patronized. I had to suppress my feelings.

So by the time you are getting ready to film the hunting, you already know how you feel about this enterprise.
Very much so. But on the other hand, I had agreed to make their film. At first, I didn't even think of making a film for myself. I filmed not having any idea how the film would look when it was finished. I had absolutely no plan, no script. I filmed bits and pieces as they came along. I was already a filmmaker. I knew what film *was,* but in this case, I was not really conscious, and did not at first think of this as *my* work.

On the other hand, when I was shooting, it had to be something I felt that I wanted to do. Even when they said, "Make this shot with this tall black guy and we'll make fun of him," I *wanted* to do this because of what it showed about *them*. I often let myself be ordered to make certain shots.

Especially in the hunting scenes, there are unusual tonalities to the color. As you were making imagery, how conscious were you of how you wanted it to look?
I did not manipulate anything, technically. I manipulated where I put myself and how the light should fall, but I did not do anything artificial. You could say I used unsophisticated postcard compositions, where the important thing is right in the middle.

I was also concerned with composition while filming *Mosaik im Vertrauen* [1955]. I was still working with composition in *Adebar*, but in a different way: *after* filming. I looked for compositions that fit what I wanted. In *Schwechater*, I did not look at composition anymore. I didn't even look through the aperture. And in *Afrikareise* I made simple postcard compositions, which, as it turned out, were very useful for editing and for creating the metaphors I was interested in.

You asked about my manipulation of light. There was none. Sometimes I slightly underexposed, because this was color positive Gevaert stock, which if you overexpose, even a little, gets very ugly. I did want an African temperature. I wanted the film to look hot, or at least warm. Afterwards, I printed on Kodak stock, on purpose: I didn't want the look of my film to be completely dictated by the Gevaert color system. I didn't want it to be all Kodak either. By mixing the stocks, I got a special kind of color.

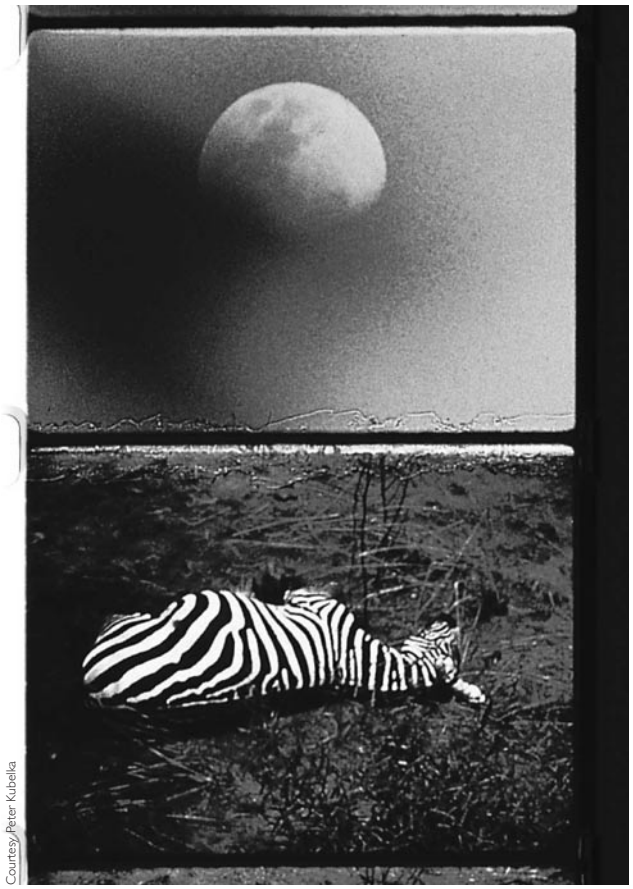
How long did the hunting go on?
Several weeks. The whole trip took maybe six weeks.

You take considerable care when you talk about Our African Journey *to be sure that the audience looks at the way sound meets sound, the way sound meets image, the way image meets image. It's been suggested that this reveals that you care only about form and not about the politics of the colonial situation in the film.*
No, it's quite the contrary. I do not *speak* about the politics because I want *the film* to speak about this. My lectures are an attempt to teach the viewers my cinematic language, *not* to translate into spoken language what the film says.

In any case, I believe that there is no translation when it comes to the essential content, the "hard core," of a medium. For example, if you had two sculptures, a bad one and a good one, it would be almost impossible to describe in words what makes the good one good and the bad one bad. You'd have to see the sculpture, touch it, directly confront it. And the same thing goes for film. I don't want to verbally interpret what I say in a film. I want the people themselves to *experience* the film's meaning, its political content.

There is, of course, another important layer, the language that is spoken. You lose this layer if you don't speak German and Sudanese. I'm very happy that the film is so successful in America, even though people don't understand what is said. Which, of course, proves my belief that when you record sound, you have incredible information on many levels, not just the meaning of the words. All this other information is there, even if you *don't* speak German or Austrian dialect or Sudanese.

Is it fair to say that your juxtaposition of sound and image, image and image, sound and sound was also a way for you to confront the revulsion you had at what



Courtesy Peter Kubelka

Juxtaposed images of moon and dead zebra

you were seeing and your recognition that you were part of that system?
Of course. This is reflected in the title: the fact that I say, "*Our* trip to Africa," which includes me.

It also includes us, as viewers.
It includes everybody—except the Africans, if they were to see the film. But it *would* include the Europeans, Americans, modern civilization in general. But mainly the title says, *I,* the filmmaker, was with this trip and, although I didn't kill and shoot, I was there.

And you were shooting on a different level.
Yes, I also "shot" them.

I *was* horrified by what happened—that is true. But on the other hand, I do not see life in a simple black-and-white manner. That such and such a thing is bad, even horrible, doesn't mean there is only one experience of it. You can be horrified *and* you can laugh at the same thing.

I'd like to bring up the term "hereditary sin" (*Erbsünde*), as is taught in the Catholic religion. As a child, I was raised Catholic. I was born in Vienna, then spent a lot of time in a small village in the country, which was very important for me. I was a cowherd in the summer. I lived with my grandmother and my grandaunt, because my father, who was a musician, was on tour a lot. My grandmother and grandaunt were *very* Catholic. Of course, from the beginning, I never really believed everything they taught me. What I could not deal with at all was the idea of hereditary sin.

In my youth my religion teacher was not able to explain this to me, and I broke with Catholicism and became a free thinker, an atheist, when I was ten years old. When I was 15, I tried to return to the Church and couldn't do it, and then slowly freed myself of all this part of my education. When I realized that there was no essential difference between the prophet Isaiah and, for example, writers such as Emily Dickinson and James Joyce, and I was able to look at religious revelations in the same way I would look at poetry, I experienced the joy of being able not to hate religion, but to enjoy its poetry, just as I would let myself be guided by the revelations received from Joyce or Dickinson.

Another thing, when I was 20 years old, I could no longer stand to be a member of Mankind. I wrote a declaration: "Herewith I declare my resignation from Mankind. Sincerely, Peter Kubelka." But I could not implement the consequences, because if I step out of Mankind, where do I step *to*? There *is* nowhere else. I do feel like I wouldn't like to be a member of this civilization, or of my community. But there is no way out. You can kill yourself, but that doesn't change anything. At a certain point, it was very important for me to have at least said that maybe if one *could* resign, I would have resigned. But in the end, participating in the civilization in which we live means that you carry the hereditary consequences of everything that has been done before you. You can be of an opposite opinion. You can mildly change maybe your own course of life. But nobody can claim that they are not part of their civilization. Everybody carries guilt.

And *therefore,* you are *also* able to laugh about things that are tragic.

I said that *Unsere Afrikareise* should not be seen as *just* tragic, or as *just* horror. You may also laugh about what you experience in the film. My desire, when everything ends, is to go out with a laugh—Ha! Ha!—not whining about the world, but seeing clearly what it is.

I had a teacher, not an official teacher, but a man whom I admired very much, and who had respect for my films: Friedrich Heer, a great historian, who wrote *Europe, Mother of Revolutions* and several other important books. He was much older than I, and is long

dead now. When I was still in my formative years in Vienna, in the 50s, we used to drink and talk. He was the first one I heard talk in terms of the next 10,000 years. He opened me up to not think of just today, this afternoon, or tomorrow, or this year, but to envisage a depth of perspective, to become conscious that our contemporary lives are embedded in something which has already been going on for thousands of years and will continue to go on.

This is how I see the artist. The artist is not somebody whose prophecies are implemented tomorrow. The *politician* is somebody who has only one chance to implement things. When he's gone, after his term ends, his chance is over. But for artists it's different. Some of them dream things up, which perhaps will be useful in a thousand years, if mankind lasts that long.

Of course, this is an attitude that can encourage you to go on, even if something you do seems to be going nowhere.

It might also relate to your body of work. One of the things that puzzles some people in this country is that you made this very small (in terms of time: all your films together add up to only 59¾ minutes) body of work, and then seemed to stop. The question is why you're not still producing films? It occurs to me that one answer might be that the minute you would produce more, you would create less attention to the work you've already made.

Yes, that's true, but actually it was not a tactical decision. I consider myself lazy (although people say I work a lot). I don't want to do something if I don't really feel a burning need to do it. I could have made many films on the model of *Mosaik,* many films on the model of *Adebar,* many films on the model of *Schwechater,* and many films on the model of *Arnulf Rainer*. *Arnulf Rainer* uses only black-and-white flicker, but I could have gone on, into color flicker, and that would have taken me in the direction of Paul Sharits's work. He implemented many things I had *thought* about, but didn't feel I needed to *do*. In a way, each of my films is a prototype and postulates a certain *way* of making films, and each film was a step to the next phase. Actually, after I finished *Schwechater,* I made a number of painted filmstrips that would have produced what is now called color flicker, but I went on to reduce the material for the next film, *Arnulf Rainer,* to the four essential elements of cinema: light, non-light, sound and silence. The white light, of course, contains all colors, and white sound, which I used for the soundtrack, all pitches.

The other thing is that in the 70s, I started to despecialize. I consciously thought, "I don't want to see myself limited by being an artist. I want to be just a human being, an unspecialized human being." I do possess several specializations. "Filmmaker" is my deepest specialization, and I did not really stop making films, because all those years when I was teaching in Frankfurt, I worked with students who were making many things I wanted to see and which I might have made myself. I just didn't need to be the producer.

I do feel I have done my share as a filmmaker. I have done something which is still not completely received by the public and, as you suggest, is still radiating. But, being conscious that life is unique and short, I tried to step out of narrow forms of denomination, like "filmmaker." I was first a "musician"; for example, I sang with the Vienna Boys' Choir. After 15 years, I completely left music for cinema. Then, slowly, I got my music back again. I started to study old music, old wind instruments, regained playing ability, and founded Spatium Musicum, an ensemble with which I might perform modern music (Schoenberg, Webern), Baroque music, pre-Baroque music, back to the eleventh century. We also sing folk and classical music and Gregorian chant. My concert programs are structured like the montage in a film: the various pieces appear in an order that makes them each react with the next one and the one before so the whole concert expresses in a way my opinion of the essence of music.

I also founded the Austrian Film Museum, so I am also "founder." But in the end, I'm a curious, general human being. My specializations are just my working tools. Some people used to say, "You're a philosopher," but I have great difficulty with philosophy because I think the philosophers expect too much from language. They stick to language as the only tool. Language cannot bear that.

America started me on my theoretical work. When I first came here, I never thought I would lecture about anything, but then I was encouraged to become a theorist of cinema. In the last decades I have expanded my activity as a lecturer, transcending film theory toward a general theory of cultural evolution. I recommend seeing cooking as the oldest art form. To prepare living matter and make it edible was perhaps the first human activity of changing the material world.

When I lecture, I don't use a specific, prepared text. But I always prepare very carefully. As you know, I don't drink before I lecture, and I like to drink. People may say, "He shows his films for the two-thousandth time, so what's the big deal?" But every time I do it, it *is* a big deal for me, because I don't believe in recycling

a verbal presentation that I know by heart. Every time, I do it differently. I don't believe in the stability of a formulation, either. In a way you could compare me with a sculptor who works on the same theme again, and again, and again. You could call these lectures works of art—not in the sense that they are so *good,* but in the sense that they are my creations. They exist as works.

Let's return to Afrikareise. *I'm wondering to what extent you made contact with people other than the Austrians you were traveling with? One of the things that has struck me the last few times I've seen the film is the African woman who, while dancing, looks at the camera. Her look is very penetrating, a totally intelligent look, and, for me, one of the most powerful things in the film.*
This was a special relationship, a kind of love affair that was never consummated.

I tried to get away from the expedition whenever I could. In Khartoum I went to the market and met a young man who spoke a little English, and we talked and got to know each other, and he invited me to a marriage at his house. I managed to get permission to leave for a day, but stayed away three days. At this marriage, I was able to observe the traditions of Islam as it was lived in that Sudanese society, where boys and girls were not allowed to mingle on an everyday basis, but saw each other on festive occasions.

The marriages there take as long as the family can afford. An aristocratic marriage might last a month. A marriage in a well-to-do family might last a week to ten days. And during these days the hospitality is overwhelming. When I arrived, they gave me a huge metal bed to take my siesta in. The bed was in the shade when I lay down. I fall asleep and suddenly I feel a swimming sensation. I wake up and see that four people are carrying my bed into the shade, so that the sun will not hit me. Several times they came and moved my bed.

There were these dancing events where the boys and the girls would meet. The girls, starting with the very young ones, up till about 15 years old, which was maybe marrying age, would all dance. First the very youngest, then the next group, and so on. The boys, who would be in similar age groups, would watch them. I learned that this happened several times each year, as they grew up, so that when a boy reached the age of marriage, he knew exactly which girl he wanted and would tell his parents to make negotiations.

The girls also had the possibility of making their sympathy public. A girl would dance and at a certain moment would let her head fall back, in abandonment,

Courtesy Peter Kubelka

Kubelka lecturing on the theory of cooking

so that her tresses would hang down. A man could indicate his intention toward this girl by going to her and making a kind of whipping noise with his fingers. Then he would bend his head near where her head was. If the girl liked this man, she would move her hair like a whip and all her tresses would hit him in the face, an incredible moment of eroticism, accentuated, acoustically, by old women standing nearby who would let out a cry. Incredible. If the girl did not like the man, she would do nothing. It's amazing, this traditionally regulated way of communication: one knew exactly who liked whom and which pairings were building towards marriage.

There was this one girl who liked me, and she must have told somebody—somehow I found out. So as she was dancing, I went and did this gesture and she hit me with her tresses. But, of course, we could not continue the relationship. But she did consent to dance for me. The man who had invited me helped arrange the whole thing. We met in a place where no one could see, so that I could film her and she danced for me, in daylight. By European standards this would have been like a woman showing herself naked, or even something more—an extreme trespassing on tradition. All that, of course, is in the film, in how she looks at me.

I had other interesting experiences, which are not in the film at all.

Tell me one.
One happened when I spent the night alone on the Nile, waiting for a hippopotamus to be swept ashore. When a hippopotamus dies and sinks in a river, the indigenes know exactly where it will surface again: it will float down the river and will be swept ashore at a particular place. The Austrian hunters had shot a hippopotamus, but, of course, didn't want to stay for the unpleasant

Courtesy Anthology Film Archives

Woman and dead giraffe in successive shots from *Our African Journey*

part. They preferred to leave all the unpleasant things to me. I was happy because normally they were jealous about what I would see and they wouldn't. But in this case they were afraid to stay the whole night alone and wait for the hippopotamus to float ashore, so they left me there. I sat the entire night on a little folding bed which they had brought with them. I had a rifle, canned food, and my tape recorder and camera. It was there that I shot those images where it's very dark and you see many black people huddling and then dividing the meat of the hippopotamus.

During that long night, two young boys would come and sit with me, and they would speak with their night voices. This was something that moved me incredibly, because it's something we've lost in our civilization. We light up the night; we destroy the night. And we talk as loudly at night as during the day. When the sun is down, *these* people talk softly. They have a day speech and a night speech. These boys talked this night speech. I put in that quiet sound as a contrast to the violence you see during the catching of the giraffe.

There was a tribe living in this region. The tribe had a chief, and during the night he came and I greeted him. We had no common language, but I decided I would talk to him in Viennese. I was hoping that he would understand my intentions from the non-literary qualities that spoken language has. If you listen to somebody, you know if he likes you or not. You know if the person is angry. You have an idea what his intentions are. So I addressed the chief as if he were another Viennese, just like I'm speaking to you now. And he spoke in *his* language.

He was sitting on his mat; I was sitting on my folding bed. During the conversation, I realized he wanted to explain something, and he pointed to me and to himself and indicated big and small. After a time I realized he wanted to sit with me on my "throne," because he saw this folding bed as an instrument of heightened personal prestige. So I said, "I'm very happy to have you sit with me on this throne. Would you please take a seat?" Speaking normally, you automatically make the right gestures. He understood perfectly and, ceremonially, sat himself next to me and we stayed the rest of the night without speaking a word. He was completely content and we waited for the morning. In the morning his other subjects arrived.

What followed was very interesting, and very complicated, because the level of organization in his tribe was such that they themselves did not have the economic means to hunt a hippopotamus, which is an expensive venture. This tribe wanted access to the hippopotamus shot by the expedition. But there was also a mutiny going on. One of the warriors wanted to dethrone the chief, who was old and weak. One could see that he had no physical authority. So I thought I would help him. I had with me some cheap glass necklaces that the Austrians hoped to use for barter. I stood up, took one of these necklaces, and said to the king, "Would you please accept this necklace." I put it over his head, around his neck, and formally endorsed him. It had an incredible effect upon the others. Then the insurgent came up to me very close and said, "I want something too! What about *me*! Give one to *me*!" And I said, "No! You get nothing! *This* is the chief." And it worked. It may not have worked for very long, but it worked for this moment.

I had the order from the Austrians that the Africans could have the carcass of the hippopotamus, but I had to save the head with the teeth, which were regarded as a trophy. So I stood by and watched the body cut up and saw that the head was saved.

Do you want one more story?

Sure.
This one was very important for me. I was fascinated by African music, with what you call ethnic music. This was one of the main reasons why I accepted the commission to make a film. When we were in the hill country, towards Ethiopia, we were in a town that has a big market where many tribes meet. We were staying in a colonial hotel built by the English. One night, in the distance, I heard African music and was so eager to get closer to it, I risked my life. The hotel was behind barbed wire, protected because this was a dangerous region. I just walked out, in the darkness, toward the music. I came into an assemblage of huts, to the astonishment of the people there. I had my tape-recorder with me and that music is in the film. It's the music you hear when you see the Arab man go behind the white lady and there are these yellow columns. The music is similar to a jackass's braying.

That's what I thought it was.
Well, there *is* a jackass braying; then I continue with the *music,* which imitates the jackass braying. The music is also very erotic, like the jackass's braying, which is an expression of its desire for a female. The music takes a parallel form.

So there was the music. It turned out that I had chanced into a brothel. There were musicians and there were whores and there were men drinking heavily. They asked me what I was doing there, and I tried to explain that I wanted to hear the music, and wanted to be allowed to stay. (This is all without any common language.) They gave me a seat and I sat there for a while taping and watching what was going on.

Then one of the men, who was very drunk, started to heckle me, to make obscene gestures, and flick his hand in front of my face. I tried to say I didn't want to fight, I just wanted to listen to the music; and I stayed friendly. Then one of the girls decided she wanted me to come with her and pay and be her guest. I really didn't dare to do it, since this was the girl the heckler had his eye on.

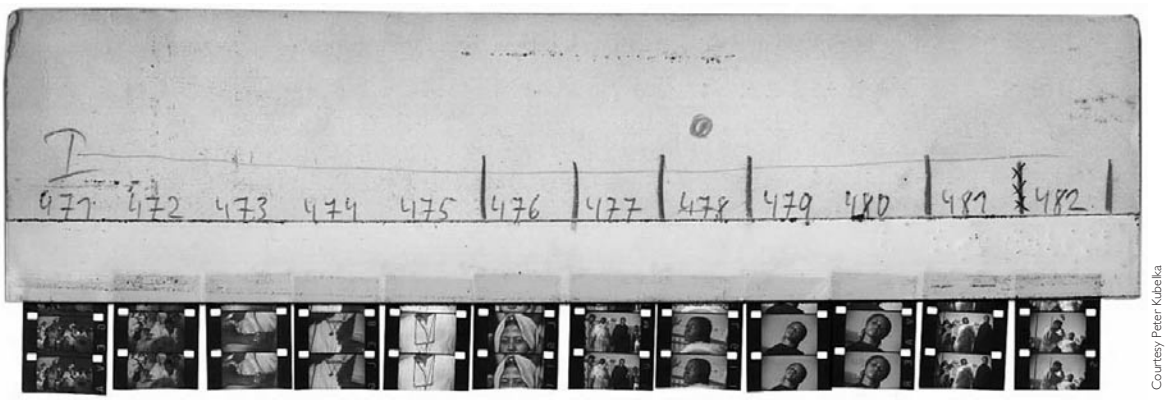
The whole thing built up and became very dangerous. They all had knives, and this was a place where you really had to know how to defend your honor. I had seen people with slices in their bodies from knife fights, and I started to be afraid, but I was still taping—this music meant so much to me. But then the girl came and threw her hair around my head and danced in front of me, and the man became more and more aggressive. Finally some of the older men, who were not so drunk, came to my aid, but wanted me out. I tried to say, "I would like to stay a little more," but they made sure I left. I walked back in the dark to the hotel.

Whenever I could, I tried to step out away from the safari, but most of this is not in the film.

When you got back to Austria after the trip, you thought you were going to do two films: their film and your film. What happened between you and the Austrians as you slowly discovered they weren't going to get their film?
We'd had had a falling out already in Africa. They were saying I wasn't a good comrade, because I didn't laugh at their jokes—things like that. So when we came back, the climate was already rather cool. They thought that now I would make the film and that they would have it within four to six weeks, so that they could show it to their business friends.

A cine-trophy . . .
Yes, yes! [laughter]

I have suppressed some of these memories, because they are so awful. Anyway, once we were back, of course, they weren't paying me anything and I was



Courtesy Peter Kubelka

From Kubelka's visual and acoustical "Dictionaries" for *Our African Journey.*

penniless again. I had no work print for *Afrikareise*; I couldn't afford to make a work print. I had color positive stock, so I made a black-and-white negative, of very low quality, and used that negative as a work print to edit the film. In order to know what colors I had, I cut three frames from every shot, either from the beginning or the end, and made a catalogue: I numbered every shot and pasted it on a piece of cardboard so that there were two frames that I could look through. These cards were approximately ten inches long, and each had approximately ten different color images on it. Altogether, there were about 1,400 shots.

My working process required lots of imagination. My limitations turned out to be very important; my limited economic situation has always helped me. Not having money and not having machines at my disposal forced me to make the film in my head, instead of following the suggestions of a Moviola. The editing table is a very dangerous instrument because it provides you immediately with a very easily palatable product. It suggests harmless solutions.

I started working on the film at the place of a foreign news service correspondent (later I worked at Listofilm, a lab in Vienna). He let me edit the film on his table, but only during off-hours when other people weren't working. I could go there, work a little bit, then go home again and work in my imagination, which, by the way, is what I also had done with the metric films. The metric films were all made without projector, without Moviola, by hand. I always carried pieces of those early films in my pocket to look at to touch and compare. The fact that I touched the film strips continuously led me to the essence of cinema. The *material* taught me what to do.

So I started to work on what became *Afrikareise,* with the people who had commissioned it exercising constant pressure. At some point, when they realized I was *only* making *my* film, there were lawyers involved and we reached a compromise that I would give them all the material which is not in *my* film, the bulk of the material.

Image and sound?
Yes. They thought they would edit it themselves, which they never did. This all went on for five years, and all these five years, I lived like somebody pursued by the law. It was a horrible situation, my worst years, economically.

When, finally, the film was finished, I did what I had done with my earlier films. I held one public premiere for everybody: for friends, for other artists, and for the people who had commissioned the film. For

Courtesy Peter Kubelka

Woman (top) and natives dividing meat, from *Our African Journey*

them it was a scandal and after the screening they tried to beat me up in the corridor—which they couldn't do because I was a judo fighter and it was easy for me to defend myself.

Then they were determined to destroy the film. There were lawyers again, and they wanted me to hand over the film.

So they read the film correctly!
Generally, yes, they did, though they didn't really understand what I was doing. For example, in the scene where you see the elephant lying wounded, there are two hunters to the left side, still shooting at him. And I have synchronized, with these gun shots, this man who says, "Elephant," and taps his finger on the table. So you have a sound which is very harmless, the fingers tapping, synchronized with the rifle going off. *They* read this as a defect: "You were not even capable of recording the shots correctly! You do not have good shots, so you make *us* look ridiculous." They found it embarrassing. In the end I made an agreement never to show *Unsere Afrikareise* in their home town, which I have not done to this day.

At the time of the premiere in Vienna, I had just come back from my first trip to America. When I was almost finished with the film, it turned out that at that time, 1966, Listofilm, which was then my lab, could not make optical sound in 16mm. I didn't want magnetic sound; I wanted good optical sound.

My American filmmaker friends, whom I had been getting to know since 1958—Stan Brakhage, and since 1963, Jonas Mekas, P. Adams Sitney—had constantly been saying, "Come to America!" Jonas had even gotten me a grant from Jerome Hill, who was giving very small grants so that filmmakers could finish films. I was the only non-American who got one of twelve grants: $10 per week, $40 per month. I got this grant in 1964 and during the last two years of making *Afrikareise,* I was sustained by this $10 a week. It was my only income, but it raised my spirits tremendously.

Then Jonas made arrangements for a New York premiere, and Brakhage invited me to give a lecture in Denver and to come and stay with him. He said I should print *Afrikareise* in his lab, Western Cine, in Denver, that they could do good optical sound. After 14 years of barely surviving, this flight to Denver was actually paid for by a lecture fee, and for me this was a flight in heaven. After 14 years of never having any acknowledgment, my *work* paid my way. I will never forget that moment. It was a beautiful day, no clouds, and I saw America gliding under me. And there was Brakhage waiting in his Land Rover.

The first thing we did was go to a steakhouse, a wonderful event because there was the blazing Denver sun around noon, and we entered this steak house which was completely dark, and ate these *huge* steaks, which I had never seen before. Then we went to Brakhage's home. He had moved out of his studio and left it to me so I could finish the cutting of the original negative. I had come with the work print and the sound and had not yet cut the original. We printed it in Denver and, in fact, Brakhage was the first to see *Afrikareise,* other than the technicians.

Then I went back and premiered the film in New York. It was a huge success. Many filmmakers and also non-film artists (Rauschenberg, Oldenburg, Warhol . . .) came. I was invited to do a lecture at Harvard, in a very distinguished lecture program. I told them I didn't do lectures and they said, "Either you do a lecture or we cannot hire you, because this is a lecture series." I hesitated, but everybody said, "Do it! Do it!" So I did this talk at Harvard and from then on, there was a constant demand, until 1978, when I got my professorship in Frankfurt.

Later Brakhage said to me, "When you came to America, you always had your eyes on the floor; you walked with your head bowed. Now, your head is up."

I will never forget what America did for me. For the first time people wanted to ask me questions. In Austria, you could only speak ironically about what you did. Questions were either traps or jokes. Here, I encountered a completely different approach to my work and to myself. I gained a new life.

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Abstract A conversation with Peter Kubelka, focusing on *Our African Journey* (*Unsere Afrikareise,* 1966), his short, brilliantly edited exposé of colonialism, constructed from sound and image recorded while he was a young filmmaker in the employ of several Austrian businessmen on safari in Africa. Kubelka's revealing stories about the process of shooting the film and his candid discussion of the film's politics bring new light to an avant-garde and documentary classic.

Amplifying the weight of the nation: Nargis in (and as) *Mother India*

> Nation-states are incomplete regions for the purposes of analyzing cinema. Neither from a production nor a consumption standpoint do political boundaries sufficiently divide, group, or structure world cinema. If global cinema is more than the sum of all the national cinemas, then the task confronting us is to develop a set of regions more meaningful and more powerful in explaining the phenomenon as a communications medium.
>
> — Gerald M. McDonald, in *Place, Power, Situation, and Spectacle*

Sheila J. Nayar

Invisible Representation

The Oral Contours of a National Popular Cinema

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Orality Invisible

The theme of social inclusion as it relates to media readily anticipates consideration of race, gender, class, and other such visible markers of identity. But what about *invisible* modes of identification and representation that link outwardly divergent cultures and groups? In other words, though film may be a visual medium, not everything that determines one's representation on screen is necessarily related to sight. Too often we limit our assessment of how viewers are being socially excluded from the media experience on the basis of physical *presence,* neglecting other seminal ways in which groups or, indeed, entire subcultures, such as that of the subaltern,[1] may be finding representation—and not always in a manner wedded to national or linguistic boundaries.

Take, for example, the case of a Nigerian villager who has never left the confines of his or her community, yet finds an Indian popular film—seen without the benefit of subtitles or dubbing—completely comprehensible, even culturally *familiar*.[2] Indeed, a film as "indigenous" and "nationalistic" as *Mother India* (1957) continues to be embraced by audiences of other nations and races and languages and histories, as if it were in fact recounting the story of Mother Nigeria, or Mother Egypt, or of Romany Gypsies in Eastern Europe or Swahili-speaking girls in Zanzibar.[3]

To be sure, scholars have speculated (albeit often only in passing) as to why such disparate nations identify so intensely with these Hindi-language popular films—films which are, incidentally, frequently ridiculed by critics for their *masala* ("spice-mix") blend of tawdry escapism, formulaic storytelling, and narratively irrelevant song-and-dance numbers. Some analysts have (also in passing) attributed this peculiar transcultural identification to a parallel experience of modernization encroaching on traditional society (one of the films' common themes). Others maintain it derives from a mutual privation that privileges escapist melodrama and the presentation of a material utopia, while still others contend that it is born of shared family values, or of poorer nations' inability to afford better, more substantive entertainment. (These Bollywood films are, after all, comparatively cheap entertainment imports.) These are of course all reasonable theories and under no circumstances invalid.[4] But is it not possible that in our commitment to that which we can readily measure with pens and computers, or support through an intellectual reasoning carefully organized and modified on paper, a much broader infrastructure of identification has been missed?

My mention of these instruments of writing and the processes that accompany them is not solely rhetorical. It relates significantly to the theory I want to suggest here. Indeed, I think one of the reasons we may have neglected this other possibility is that—by virtue of the technologies we possess—we are, in actual fact, more *same* than different. That is, one thing binds us (for, if you are reading this, you are one of "us"—irrespective of your race, your culture, your gender, or your class). This one thing fundamentally separates and distinguishes us from millions of others (from 300 million such people in India alone), and thus makes this invisible transcultural identity that much harder to conceptualize, let alone to identify. I am speaking here of literacy—of our literacy, and hence of the non-literacy of others—and of the cognitive consequences of this as they apply to an individual's comprehension, organization, and experience of the world.

Why might a Nigerian villager who has never left his or her village call a film like *Mother India* culturally familiar and completely comprehensible? Perhaps it is because such movies do not take the form of a literacy-driven object. Instead, the conventional Indian popular film possesses clear characteristics of oral performance and orally transmitted narratives, conspicuously sharing traits with, for example, Homeric epic and the Indian *Mahabharata*. It is a cultural product that has been historically circumscribed by the psychodynamics of orality—that is, by the thought processes and personality structures that distinguish a non-writing mindset, and, as such, it is a product that employs specific devices and motifs that are traditionally part of orally based storytelling.[5]

Though English and humanities scholar Walter Ong contends in his seminal book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*[6] that the characteristics that distinguish oral narrative are somehow of the past, receding (though perhaps residually still apparent in modern times), this may not be the case. It may simply be that, up till now, there has been no comprehensive application of the orality-literacy paradigm to visual media. Studies have been limited more or less exclusively to the anthropological study of oral peoples and to the investigation of the oral presence as it appears (or is disappearing) in *written* texts. In recent years, for example, there has been a noticeable shift from the study of orality as reflected in print to an interest in and focus on its consequences for computer and Internet communication.[7] A legitimate transition, to be sure, but one that is still grounded in the *written* word.

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Rajendra Kumar, Sunil Dutt (top left), and Nargis in *Mother India*— an "indigenous" film with global reach

But visual narrative is like written narrative, in the sense that it too is a text and hence requires a kind of "reading." And perhaps, in order to be comprehended or appreciated, some cinematic narrative forms require of their spectators what Roland Barthes has referred to as a "writerly" mindset.[8] But what if an individual does not possess such a mindset? What if, due to her or his functioning in a non-literate or low-literate or oral-privileging environment, s/he does not have the cognitive skills required? Of course, those of us who are readers, who are citizens of print, "are so literate that it is very difficult for us to conceive of an oral universe of communication or thought except as a variant of a literate universe."[9] But an oral person absorbs and organizes, and retains and recalls, information differently. For instance, s/he cannot organize thoughts with syntactical sophistication (for it is literacy that turns one's thought processes into more complicated shapes). In such a universe, the knower is incapable of being separated from the known,[10] and as such, his or her relationship to the world, to the group, and to the self is radically different from that of the person who can search a computer for data, or read about a character's psychological struggle, or even look up a street name on a city map.

So, where does one "reside" when life is inhabited without the benefit of text? What is history when it exists bereft of documented and verifiable facts? What can one remember—indeed, how *must* one remember —in order not to forget?

I am not trying to propose that there is some distinct and definitive split between "oral" and "literate" films, nor some great fixed opposition between orality and literacy—or, worse yet, between literate and illiterate. But certainly the number of years that the average student in the United States must devote to honing a "higher order of thinking"[11]—some 15 to 20, if one counts college—attests to the length, breadth, and complexity of acquiring a literate mindset.

Imagine, then, a film industry such as Bombay's, whose primary mission these past 50 years has been profit; to be sure, it is in such an industry's interest to

reach the largest audience possible. Now, imagine that this is an audience with a historically significant percentage of non- and low-literate viewers, and also one not bound by a serviceable lingua franca. (Significantly, only one-third of Indians are native Hindi speakers.) What does an industry of this type do? If it's savvy, it shapes its product into one that satisfies the greatest numbers. And orally based characteristics of thought and storytelling would not only make a visual product accessible to the oral mindset; given that they are generally seen as more elemental, more universal, perhaps even more natural, they would also render a visual product more "readable" to those unschooled in the spoken language of the film. No wonder, then, that such films have been popular in nations with significant numbers of non- or low-literate viewers. True, India's recently expanded upper-middle class, in conjunction with a wealthier audience of Indians abroad, is starting to make subtle inroads into the Bollywood film formula landscape. But the films that succeed with *non*-elite audiences (i.e., rural, uneducated) rarely depart from the oral latticework.

So, let us examine some of these oral particulars. Their presence can be seen in some of the industry's biggest hits of the past five decades, including *Mother India, Sholay* (*Flames,* 1975), *Khal Nayak* (*The Villain,* 1993), *Baazigar* (*Trickster,* 1993), and *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (*Who Am I to You,* 1994).

The Oral Contours of the Conventional Hindi Film

1. Pastiche and Preservation

One of the broadest psychodynamic characteristics of orally based thought is the tendency toward the additive rather than the subordinative. Without the ability to write, to store, and to organize information elsewhere than the brain, the possibility of developing structural cohesiveness, of manipulating a story for tight shape and flow—especially as regards lengthy narrative—is impossible. Indeed, the "analytic, reasoned subordination that characterizes writing"[12] arises *with writing itself*. Without writing, meticulously sculpting a sentence—let alone an entire plot—is quite impossible. Oral narratives are hence, by noetic necessity, episodic, sequential, and additive in nature. Works such as the *Mahabharata* and African oral epic are not built upward into some kind of pyramidal form, but are rather constructed around techniques like the use of flashbacks, thematic recurrences, and chronological breaks. This is because these are the only ways to handle extended narrative, to keep it manageable, memorable, and uncomplicated. For this reason, orally inscribed narrative—and this includes Bombay cinema—often has the feeling of being piecemeal and disaggregative, of being coarsely stitched together. It is pastiche—but quite without the postmodern self-consciousness.

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"Breaking for the past": Sanjeev Kumar, Dharmendra, and Amitabh Bachchan in *Sholay*

One of these oral structural devices in particular, the flashback, deserves consideration. Its prevalence in oral epic is due in large part to its facilitating a movement between data more easily transmittable in separate containers. To be sure, the oft described "boxes within boxes"[13] feel of oral epic arises to a large degree from the repeated use of the flashback. In the Hindi film, we are constantly transported back and forth and back again in time—between various storage spaces, so to speak—to watch the playing out of this romance or that crisis. In *Sholay,* for instance, there is a police chief's story-within-story recollection of meeting two thieves whom he plans now to hire to execute his vengeance; this is followed by a protracted flashback to the chief's once idyllic family life and also its tragic ruination at the hand of the film's villain, Gabbar Singh; and finally by a third flashback portraying the once exuberant, spirited life-force of the police chief's daughter-in-law, who is now reduced to forlorn widowhood.

In the more recent *Khal Nayak,* we straggle in and out of a rough, crude underworld tale, a Rama and Sita-type love story, not to mention a mother-son melodrama, stalling on several occasions to voyage back in time and witness the childhood experiences that led to the protagonist's transformation into a heinous villain, as well as the traumatic aftermath of that particular metamorphosis on the boy's upright family.

As with lengthy oral narrative, in the typical Hindi film there are also numerous sidetracks or "parallel skits" that, unlike subplots, have little to no bearing on the major story line. These digressions may be fun, funny, maudlin, titillating, even gruesome, but they are neither particularly revealing of character nor narratively instrumental. Much like the African oral epic, where episodes of, say, horror or comedy are developed for their independent appeal,[14] Hindi film is rife with stand-alone sketches and deviations, often of a humorous or violent nature and similarly amplified for full effect. In *Sholay,* one finds a solid 15 minutes of the first half dedicated to the two goodhearted antiheroes' extraneous gambol through a prison sentence. In *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun,* the servants' vaudevillian mishaps take the spectator down a narrative blind alley for the sheer enjoyment of it. And certainly this collective willingness to digress is reflected in the obligatory song-and-dance numbers that punctuate, sometimes puncture, virtually every conventional Bollywood movie.

To be sure, the Hindi film is often derided by film scholars and critics for its stringy and episodic nature, for its lack of an "organic consistency."[15] Sometimes this lack of any organizing principle, this constant detouring and often lengthy meandering, is kindly attributed to its imitating indigenous precursors like the *Mahabharata*. But, rather than paying tribute to or being modeled on ancient tales, the Hindi film and the earlier oral epics are, I believe, cognate with respect to form. (Certainly many of the characteristics of the Hindi film that have been dubbed "indigenously Indian" by critics are also common to oral performance and orally based narrative irrespective of national or cultural boundaries.) Other similarities seem to bolster this point—like a second broad psychodynamic characteristic common to orality: the commitment to a conservative-traditionalist rather than experimental mind-set.

Whereas the literate mind-set looks toward experimentation in storytelling, that is, toward the achievement of something different, original, and unique, the oral mind-set inhibits such thought experimentation. As Ong points out, this is because a mind that must be the holder of all things is naturally inclined toward pragmatism and conservatism, not toward speculation and discovery.[16] Originality (as the literate mind understands that term) necessitates an ability to move away from the original via notes, or books, or a computer screen—to leave a work, or a body of work, in order to change it. But if one *cannot* leave the original for fear of losing it altogether (and hence of losing the self that is carried forward through time), then such movements are resisted, are in fact self-annihilating. So any contemporary shifts in social relations, any tensions *du jour,* even the jazzy emergence of fads and technologies, are less "touted for their novelty" than synchronically "presented as fitting the traditions of the ancestors."[17] In other words, the new is invariably incorporated into the old (and in some manner, the "forever"), resulting in a kind of mythic "telescoping" of temporalities, as social psychologist Ashis Nandy has perceptively identified with reference to Hindi film.[18] In *Khal Nayak,* for instance, we find that the modern pursuit of a terrorist via cell phones, helicopters, and fast cars ends with a simple, coherent (and some might say, regressive) return to mythic patterns and human relations—not to mention clear-cut allusions to the epic *Ramayana*. And in *Baazigar,* the contemporary city setting naturally segues by the film's end to ancient ruins and deep-rooted principles regarding family obligation and honor.

Relatedly, because the fabric of oneself in oral cultures is transmitted by word of mouth, from one person to another, from the previous generation to the next, what this also implies is that self-preservation is an inherently *collective* affair, a group endeavor. As a result, communal structures of personality are fostered, with things being "we"-inflected rather than "I"-inflected.[19] (Indeed, the assertion of *individual* rights, as Marshall McLuhan has noted, appears only with the rise of print.[20]) Certainly this is applicable to the Bombay film industry, which specializes in "we"-inflected dramas that consistently and continuously conserve the traditional order. The movies, like the oral epics before them, ensure that the way things *are* is, in the end, restored—and triumphantly so. The emphasis is similarly on the preservation of the ordered society, which is considered in oral narrative the "highest good and goal toward which the hero's physical and intellectual development is bent."[21] This is not to say that there cannot be all measure of disruption, disorder, and discord during the course of a story—through displays of intergenerational aggression, say, or the transgressing of civilly sanctioned boundaries. But, by the end, the existing social order must be preserved. Those who have gone amiss must be punished, banished, or destroyed, or prove themselves certifiably penitent, for only such actions can ensure that the "communal self" is not atomized.[22]

So, in *Mother India,* we have Nargis shooting her wayward son rather than allowing him to run roughshod over the ethics of their community. In *Sholay,* it is Gabbar Singh who is eliminated, with the village

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The "we"-inflected universe of *Mother India*

returned to the good management of the police chief. In *Khal Nayak,* the villain, awash in sudden moral conviction, surrenders before the *city* is returned to the good management of the police chief. And in *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun,* where no villains exist, two families—united by a marriage that has since terminated due to a death—are wedded together again by another marriage within the same family. All ends happily because in effect all ends *just as it started*.

Though it is true that these resolutions are to some degree shaped by censorship codes—and are therefore taken by some analysts to be a metaphoric if not blatantly pro-state product of government intervention—the fact that such endings are firmly anticipated by audiences implies a deeper raison d'être. After all, audiences are publicly known to *reject* films that do not uphold the status quo; and in light of the findings in orality studies, it seems quite feasible that the embrace of such patriotic (sometimes even jingoistic) overtones is in actual fact a modern extension of the oral mind-set's conservatism as regards the communal self. What else could explain the unwavering embrace by audiences in Ghana and Turkey of *Mother India* despite its blatantly nationalistic ardor?

But what then is there if originality and uniqueness are eschewed? Certainly Homer was inventive and artful in his poetic enterprises. Still, his was a different kind of artfulness—not to mention a kind similarly attributable to the Bombay cinema. For Hindi films, like the oral epics that preceded them,[23] manipulate *public* stories. They too creatively refashion a flotilla of formulae and themes that an audience has come to know and expect. Additions and alterations are of course made, but to material that is already part of a collective storehouse of experience and knowledge.

This then explains the Hindi film spectators' acceptance of, if not preference for, formula films that the slightly contemptuous critic might term inflexibly redundant and endlessly repetitive of themes and story lines, and the more sympathetic critic might characterize as possessing a kind of déjà-vu-ness.[24] And it is true: when one sinks into a Bollywood theater seat, one can predict with a fair amount of accuracy some of the elements or motifs of the story about to be encountered: there will be the flowering of a romantic love, followed by a romantic crisis most likely spurred by a villain (perhaps a parent or really malicious felon); there will be the distress of a mother, the sacrifice of a son; an oath; vengeance; malefactors punished and social injustices put right by the hero; and the romantic couple reunited and the community victoriously returned to its harmonious state.

Perhaps you are here reminded of Vladimir Propp's analysis of the narrative structure of fairy tales. Indeed, analysts have often labeled Hindi films "fairy tales," or "myths,"[25] and this is largely because this kind of storytelling is, to literate minds, profoundly ahistorical, exhibiting a tendency to fly in the face of "realism," to revert to fantasy endings. But if we take into account how the oral mind-set must synthesize all experience into a present story—that is, that each tale in the telling must be a repository of the past, and "a resource for renewing awareness of present existence"[26] —then Hindi film's sameness, its repetition, its aforementioned telescoping of temporalities, makes complete sense. In this case, the storyteller's art lies in

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A joyous (and orally inscribed) "cinema of attractions": the joint family of *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (above); Salman Khan and Madhuri Dixit (right), with plot-pivotal dog Tuffy

being able to entwine the old formulas and themes with the new, in being able to "read" the audience's desire for the novel from *within* "a deep sense of tradition, which preserves the essential meaning of stories."[27]

If we are willing to concede that the films' formulaic nature, their grand-scale redundancy, is born of their orally inscribed communal nature—of their being a public, as opposed to private, property—then another peculiar characteristic of Hindi films is explained: their proclivity for quoting one another. That is to say, there are incessant references in Hindi films to prior films, an endless borrowing-cum-stealing of previous movies' tunes, lyrics, dialogue, iconic props, whole characters, and sometimes even entire plots.[28] In *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun,* for example, the characters assemble one evening to play an extended (in terms of screen time, at least) game in which they recite passages, sing songs, and dialogically act out complete scenes from other movies (including *Sholay*). *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* has itself been referenced, used, and abused in at least half a dozen movies since that film's 1994 release, by way of reprised melodies, quoted lines, borrowed costumes, embezzled props heavy with sentimental weight, and even one farcical send-up of a musical number. In Hollywood, some of these strategies would indubitably result in hefty legal suits. But the concept of plagiarism, of idea-ownership, is a consequence of literacy, more specifically of print.[29] In the oral universe, there is no such thing. One cannot steal what belongs to the collective consciousness of the group. Of course, such pilfering is not only for the purpose of repeating knowledge in order that it live on and maintain its relevancy; repetition is also "a token of the joy of recollection."[30] The viewer, in other words, joins in a highly *participatory* event, an overtly shared memory-event that is pleasurable precisely because it is continuous with other films, not separate from them.

2. The Good, the Bad, and the Wordy

There are other characteristics of orally inscribed narrative which may be less broad, but which play out with equal significance in the Hindi film. Their reasons for being may perhaps be evoked best in the form of a question: If one must store information exclusively in the mind, how must a story—with its transitory oral utterances—be executed so that it can be thus stored? In the Hindi film, the answers are manifested in two ways: verbally (as one might expect), and also visually.

One of the traits of oral performance, of oral cultures even, is agonistic delivery. That is, there exists the tendency to perform verbally in a manner that is, by literate turns of phrases, dynamic, thick, excessive, or flatulent. This is because knowledge in the oral world, incapable as it is of being disengaged from the act, is situated within the "context of struggle."[31] Knowledge exists *in* the speaking—as outward display, as event; and as such, it necessarily "engage[s] others in verbal and intellectual combat."[32]

This is certainly not hard to discern in the conventional Bollywood film, where actors do not so much talk as spout, orate, and hyperbolically perorate, and where success is wholly in the *doing* of things. Heroes and heroines have no problem talking out loud to themselves; but their discussions are neither about nor demand from an audience anything that is analytical,

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Vengeance in *Sholay*: Kumar and Amjad Khan (as super-villain Gabbar Singh)

self-reflective, or categorizationally abstract. Talking and existing is fully tied to the operational world.[33] As Nandy has averred, though without connecting it to orality, Hindi films are "anti-psychological"; there is no "interior" story. Nothing exists within a character that is not said. And so, when the police chief in *Sholay* wants vengeance, he expresses himself in the form of a highly dramatized oath, full of bravura and overstated spite. And when in *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* there is a discussion of familial ethics, it is housed not in personal admittances or intimate confessions, but in publicly shared truths or memories—that is, in clichés, in proverbs, in forms of utterances that are guarded against change because they render knowledge easily transportable.

It is rare, in fact, to find a Hindi film that has not, by its denouement, skidded into language that is noticeably aphoristic. For example, in *Baazigar,* just prior to that film's violent showdown, the protagonist declares imperiously to his fiancée about her diabolical father: "You have only seen the crown on his head. Look under the thief's sleeve and you will find blood." We then witness in flashback the pitiful aftermath of her father's depravity (i.e., his father and sister are dead, his mother stricken with dementia). When we return to the present, it is to the protagonist informing his betrothed with axiomatic import: "You have only been pricked with a thorn. I have been wounded with a trident." Some literate minds may find such dialogue platitudinous, even embarrassing, but that is only because long-term exposure to print has engendered an anxious need to be original, to shun clichés.

Agonistic display in oral narrative (and cultures) manifests itself in other ways, too. Because of the give-and-take nature of oral communications—the fact that all knowledge must pass through word of mouth—interpersonal relationships are generally kept high.[34] In order to render interaction memorable, then, physical behavior is presented in a fashion that is celebrated, exaggerated, even extreme. In Homer, for instance, one finds enthusiastic portrayals of gross physical violence: of "slaughtered corpses" and "bloody filth,"and of "jaws glistening, dripping red," as "brazen spearhead[s] smash [their] way clean through below the brain in an upward stroke."[35] As for the *Mahabharata,* who doesn't shudder at Bhima's placing his foot upon the throat of his enemy, so that he might rip open his breast and drink his warm lifeblood? The same applies to Hindi film, where, stagy as they may be, fight scenes are grisly and blood-soaked, with lurid sound effects enhancing the kung-fu kicks, snapped limbs, gruesome impalings, and glass panes literally shattering and plunging "clean through below the brain in an upward stroke." In the protracted 12-minute showdown of *Baazigar,* for instance, an already embattled, blood-soaked Shah Rukh Khan downs seven savage thugs twice his size, is choked once, thrown against a wall twice, finally is skewered (in slo-mo)—and still lives long enough to crawl into his mother's lap, where he can die in maudlin, regressed, and oratorical splendor.

But this is the case not only for antagonistic interchanges; it is equally so for approbatory ones. One finds equal cinematic energy invested in extravagant praise and an unabashed—and to literate minds, overripe—glorification of others: of stoic mothers and sacrificing sons, of virtuous daughters and pals-for-life. For instance, in *Sholay,* we find the two male leads racing down a rural road on a motorcycle, declaring boisterously in song, "This friendship will never be destroyed; we'd sooner die than let that occur"; and in *Khal Nayak,* the villain's "Ma," cast here as the receptacle of all goodness and the mute bearer of all ills, is exalted on several occasions—including during an argument, within a sentimental song, and even between the punches of a fistfight.

Amplification and polarization—and their inevitable by-product, melodrama—are also part and parcel of the characters who inhabit orally inscribed narrative. Colorless personalities—characters who are quiet, still, delicately nuanced—cannot survive in such a world. They must, like the mnemonic phrases of an oral epic, be organized into some kind of form that will render them permanently memorable. Hence Bollywood is populated by one-dimensional, oversized, and inflated personalities who can be classified (almost mnemonically) into stereotypes such as "wicked

dacoits" and "beautiful village girls," or "victimized mothers" and "millionaire's sons." They are big, they are brash, they are epic. They stand out from the background; they cannot belong to it. (In fact, Indian movie stars—who, for many spectators, have a status akin to that of gods—themselves tend to stand out from the roles they are inhabiting, with most stars playing the same "mnemonic personality" over and over again.)

Of course, one might also say that the background itself stands out, in the sense that these stories are always enacted on sets that are optically excessive, visually voluble. The Hindi film universe is, after all, one of sprawling mansions and evildoer hideaways that smack of Disneyland, of idyllic villages inhabited by people who sport spangled costumes of crisp, clean silk. The real is discarded in favor of the grand, which is certainly more memorable. Fantasy—or, rather, the fanciful, the cinematically resplendent and utopian—though indubitably speaking to an audience's desire for escape from a much less fanciful existence, also fortifies sights and sounds, rendering them less forgettable. The same could be said for the Hindi film's propensity for amplified camerawork, such as its heavy, but never ironic, use of multiple zooms-in on a heroine's horrified look, or its rapid encirclings of the leading man in trouble. Though perhaps excessive and overwrought to the literate mind, such emphatic cinematography provides cues to the spectator that are easy to read, and so to remember—a modern-day extension, perhaps, of the oral epic's reliance on clichés.

Finally, there is the Hindi film's commitment to a Manichean world, one where a highly polarized good and evil are pitted against each other, and where good (that is, the collectively agreed-upon moral order of the world) beats out—virtually without exception—all dark, destructive forces.[36] This should not be surprising, given the reliance on outsized characters who are themselves heavily polarized, the focus on exterior exploits rather than interior consciousness, and the inclination toward the preservation of the existing social structure. This aspect too can be explained when one looks to the structures and performative aspects of orality. For, in an oral universe, the memory cannot retain information that is not sufficiently amplified; nor can the individual afford trajectories that do not pragmatically bolster collective survival. Thus, for very good reason, the ambiguities of existence, the nuances of the psychological self, the grayness of the moral universe, the ordinariness of human life—all those characteristics to which texts circumscribed by literacy are so rigorously devoted—are here rarely to be found.

Oral Cinema Beyond India

If characteristics of oral performance and orally transmitted narratives were reflected more subtly or less numerously in the Hindi film, it would not be possible to argue that the industry has been largely contoured by the particular cognitive needs of its spectators. But the fact that so many appear so prominently, so resiliently, suggests theoretical legitimacy. Of course, this does not imply that there are not other historical, cultural, or aesthetic influences on the form and content of India's popular cinema and on its success outside national borders. But, certainly it seems that, up to this point, orality's contouring of the Hindi film has been fairly substantial. Further, many of the Bollywood movie's perceived inconsistencies and oft-cited contradictions as a text and practice actually make sense when examined through the prism of orality.

But what about beyond the borders of India? There are other nations that cater to audiences with large nonliterate, or low-literate, or linguistically diverse populations; and wouldn't one expect to find national cinemas elsewhere that pay inadvertent heed to the noetic requirements and expectations of their audiences? Certainly. However, there is as yet no similar work on other national cinemas whose roots may have been, or whose existence continues to be, inspired or constrained by an invisibly represented body of spectators. Still, some important evidence from secondary sources seems to confirm the theoretical claim being made here. For instance, in *Planet Hong Kong,* David Bordwell commences his study of Chinese popular cinema with a detailed description of its "distinct aesthetic."[37] Though apparently unacquainted with the movies' oral underpinnings, he describes the form and energies of that mass entertainment as being: (i) noncontemplative, (ii) non-realist, (iii) "Manichean," (iv) loosely plotted (and of "kaleidoscopic variety"), (v) kinesthetically arousing, (vi) flashback-using, (vii) tradition-refining (as opposed to originality-seeking), (viii) favoring formulas and clichés, (ix) brutal in their violence, (x) plagiaristic, and (xi) possessing a tendency to "swerve into a happy ending."[38] I can think of no better support from an impartial outside source than this, and would propose that the common "aesthetic" shared by these two cinematic forms suggests that orality might prove a worthy departure point from which to analyze the cultural, aesthetic, and sociopolitical vicissitudes of various visual media worldwide.

In fact, witnessing orality's vivid circumscription of one nation's cinema assists in exposing its more

Nargis in *Mother India*—status: "star" . . . and quo

subtle and sometimes splintered forms elsewhere: in Egyptian cinema, and in the Italian peplums (mythic "sword and sandal" movies) of the 1940s and 50s, and Hollywood blockbusters, like *Titanic, Rambo,* and *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*; in the *Amar Chitra Katha* comic books and Japanese *manga*; in Doordarshan's *Ramayana* mini-series, Mexican *telenovelas,* and American serials like *Xena: Warrior Princess*; even in MTV and the current spate of popular video games. In other words, narrative heavily inscribed by orality still persists, even within societies that are ostensibly highly literate. It is not a disappearing phenomenon, only a migratory one.

But with regard to the primary audience with which I have been dealing, that is, those of a subaltern status, certainly the new discovery of this transcultural identity has repercussions as regards social inclusion. For programs or movies that the literate-minded tout as superior, meaningful, or original, as being about something *real,* about something that *matters,* may speak more to an individual's literate biases, of his or her literate construction of the world, than to what constitutes an authentic or valid—or even real—representation.

Once, not too long ago, a rhetorical question was formulated, one that has now grown quite famous: Who speaks for the subaltern?[39] We might modify that question somewhat in relation to the media and this invisible marker of identity, and ask: Who speaks in the *language* of the subaltern, so that his representation can be self-accessed and her identification assured? After all, can we rightly say that a media image is "representing," if the spectator it is representing is from the outset noetically excluded from comprehending it?

Of course, with respect to Hindi popular film, one might contend that the subaltern has been speaking all along, and that perhaps it is the built-in limitation of the intellectual community, with its critical imprimatur derived exclusively from *literate* thought and perception, which has caused it to miss this fact—or, at the least, caused it to read only with ideological curiosity and stringent concern what has in fact been a form of subaltern self-constitution.

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Notes

1. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1983).
2. See Brian Larkin, "Indian Films and Nigerian Lovers: Media and the Creation of Parallel Modernities," *Africa,* vol. 67, no. 3 (1997), 406-40; and "Bollywood Comes to Nigeria," in *Samar 8,* Winter/Spring (1997).
3. See Carla Power and Sudip Mazumdar, "Bollywood Goes Global," *Newsweek.* February 28, 2000. Online. July 26, 2002. <http://discuss.washingtonpost.com/nw-srv/printed/int/socu/a16653-2000feb21.htm>. 6 pp.
4. For those interested in other perspectives on the Hindi popular film and its *raisons d'être,* see, amongst others, Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel, *Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi Film* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Fareed Kazmi, *The Politics of India's Conventional Cinema: Imagining a Universe, Subverting a Multiverse* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999); Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 2002); and Ravi Vasudevan, ed., *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000). Also of value is the 1981 edition of *India International Centre Quarterly,* vol. 8, no. 1 (New Delhi: India International Centre, 1981), and the various film-related writings of Sara Dickey, Wimal Dissanayake, Ashis Nandy, and Rosie Thomas.
5. Some of these characteristics of orally based narrative as reflected in Hindi film were first presented in Sheila J. Nayar, "The Impact of Orality on Indian Popular Cinema," *Visual Anthropology,* vol. 14, no. 2 (2001), 121-54.
6. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982). I draw extensively on Ong, and it should be noted that his book consolidates and systematizes the orality-related theories and ideas of many scholars, including his own. Other significant (sometimes inadvertent) contributors to the field upon whose work his own book is based include Jack Goody, Eric Havelock, A.R. Luria, Marshall McLuhan, and Milman Parry. As per-

tains to this project, see especially Goody and Ian Watt's (eds.) groundbreaking and indispensable *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1968)—especially their introductory essay, "The Consequences of Literacy"; McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962); and the many (oft anthologized) essays by Eric Havelock, including "Some Elements of the Homeric Fantasy," in *Homer's Iliad,* Harold Bloom, ed. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987). Also of great value and influence have been Isidore Okpewho's *The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979) and David Olson and Nancy Torrance, eds., *Literacy and Orality* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1991), in which appears, amongst other valuables, another Havelock essay, "The Oral-Literate Equation: A Formula for the Modern Mind."

7. The best means of confirming this claim is simply to surf the Internet. Sites exploring orality and literacy's interface with the new language of cyberspace abound—especially as they reify, substantiate, or intersect with Ong's claim of a new age of *secondary orality*: a programmatic kind of orality induced by electronic technology, and one more "deliberate and self-conscious," given its being "based permanently on the use of writing and print." Ong, 136.
8. See Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975).
9. Ong, 2.
10. Ibid., 105.
11. Scholar in the cognitive science of learning and instruction Laura Resnick describes this "higher order of thinking" as a cluster of interrelated activities that permits one the ability to yield *multiple solutions* and to make *nuanced judgments* (the emphases are hers); to apply *multiple criteria* and to deal with *uncertainty*—all in a manner that is *nonalgorithmic* and *complex,* in that the process can neither be specified nor always rendered "visible." Further, such thinking is defined by an *effortful* ability to *self-regulate* the thinking process and to *impose meaning* (3). As Resnick acknowledges, such "higher order goals are nothing new. They represent what might be called the 'high literacy' strand in the education of history" (3). This is of course not to suggest that there cannot be complexity or subtlety to oral people's thinking, but rather that theirs is architecturally fashioned out of different needs and circumstances. For more, see Resnick, *Education and Learning to Think* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1987). Online. August 17, 2002. <www.nap.edu>.
12. Ibid., 37.
13. Cedric Whitman made this observation vis-à-vis the *Iliad,* noting—as Ong summarizes—that the epic was "built like a Chinese puzzle." Ong, 27.
14. Isidore Okpewho, *The Epic in Africa*, 209.
15. Vijay Mishra, "Decentering History: Some Versions of Bombay Cinema," *East-West Film Journal,* vol. 6, no. 1, January (1992): 112.
16. Ong, 41-42.
17. Ibid., 42.
18. Ashis Nandy, "The Popular Hindi Film: Ideology and First Principles," *India International Centre Quarterly,* vol. 8, no. 1 (1981): 91.
19. Ibid., 69.
20. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 220.
21. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 36.
22. According to Manthia Diawara, the tales of African *griots* also consistently conclude with a "restoration of traditional order." See his "Oral Literature and African Film: Narratology in Wend Kuuni," in *Questions of Third Cinema,* Jim Pines and Paul Willemen, eds. (London: British Film Institute, 1989), 201.
23. Ong, 36, 60.
24. It is Nandy, 90, who contends that Hindi film audiences are expected to know a film's major elements by heart and, in this way, experience déjà vu.
25. See especially Sudhir Kakar, "The Ties that Bind: Family Relationships in the Mythology of Hindi Cinema," *India International Centre Quarterly,* vol. 8, no. 1 (1981): 11-22.
26. Ong, 98.
27. Walter Ong, "Oral Residue in Tudor Prose Style," *PMLA,* vol. 80, no. 3 (1965): 149.
28. Certainly, one might say that these films are intertextual. But they are intertextual only in the manner that *all* language is intertextual. The term, as it is utilized in current critical parlance, permits us no real latitude here, as it applies too stringently to written texts—to literature and "modern poetic language," as Julia Kristeva terms it in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).
29. Ong, *Orality,* 130-33.
30. Okpewho, 154.
31. Ong, *Orality,* 44.
32. Ibid.
33. The psychologist A.R. Luria noted the absence and/or nonprivileging of these cognitive qualities and features in the illiterate Russian peasants he interviewed in the Soviet Union, from 1931-32. See Ong, *Orality,* 49-57.
34. Ibid., 45.
35. Homer, in Okpewho, 209.
36. Of course, there are exceptions to every rule; see, for instance, the classic *Pyaasa* (*The Thirsty One,* 1957), or the more recent *Satya* (*Truth,* 1998). However, of the 100 or so films of the past two decades that qualify as hits or superhits, not a single one that I have seen actually "transgresses" this moral-order imperative.
37. David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 2.
38. Ibid., 2-20.
39. Spivak, 271.

Abstract This paper posits that the formula for India's popular cinema (a.k.a. "Bollywood"—the Hollywood of Bombay) has been fundamentally contoured by the psychodynamics of orality, i.e., by the thought processes and personality structures that distinguish a non-writerly mindset and its narrative creations. Analyses of several Bollywood hits from the past half-century illustrate how.

Stephen Prince

The Emergence of Filmic Artifacts

Cinema and Cinematography in the Digital Era

The digital revolution has taken us from pictures such as *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982), shot using conventional filmic practices but incorporating a brief sequence of digital special effects, to all-digital pictures such as *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002), in which the only residual live-action elements are the actors. But the in-your-face special effects of these films are red herrings. Media coverage plays them up, and many viewers love to experience them, but they are not the most important manifestation of the digital turn in contemporary cinema. The substantive impact of this turn lies elsewhere, and has consequences that, as yet, seem under-examined. To examine them, this article provides a snapshot of the present moment, a recording that is important because the changes are occurring so fast, and it is infused with all the nostalgia that typically attaches to snapshots. With no apologies for this nostalgia and with reference to cinematography, I want to point to a transformation that is at once substantive and, for film viewers, relatively subliminal.

The special-effects-intensive *Spider-Man*

I need to begin with an important qualification, and that is that there are always countertrends to those that I am about to discuss. An industrial and cultural field like cinema is neither monolithic nor unidirectional; important exceptions and alternatives always exist to the conditions that seem dominant or to those that seem to be emerging. Thus, while big box-office films like *Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings,* and *Spider-Man* suggest how central blockbusters are to the contemporary Hollywood industry, that industry also released pictures in

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The all-digital *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones,* with two live actors

the same year which had very limited box-office appeal (*Memento, Monster's Ball,* and *The Shipping News,* for example). In 2001, the majors released 189 films in the U.S. and Canada, but distributors unaffiliated with the majors released an additional 273 pictures. In 2002, these figures were, respectively, 220 and 229 films.[1] These pictures from non-majors were largely smaller budget, independent films, and the large number of such pictures in distribution suggests a limit to the popular notion that blockbusters dominate contemporary film.

Recognizing that there are counter-trends, in what ways is this digital turn reconfiguring the meaning and experience of cinema, altering its nature, at a deeper structural level than the provision of special effects signifies? In its first century of existence, cinema was a photo-mechanical medium, its images arising from chemistry, darkroom, and processing lab, fixed in analog form on a celluloid surface, and then trucked around the country for exhibition. This paradigm is changing because of the influx of digital tools in all phases of film production: set design, cinematography, editing, sound, postproduction, distribution, and exhibition. Even the domain of acting now sees the encroachment of digital designs. Oliver Reed continued to perform in *Gladiator* after his death, courtesy of some digital cutting and pasting that enabled the late actor to complete a necessary scene. George Lucas continues to direct his actors long after they've gone home —after converting their performances to digital video, he tweaks line readings and interchanges facial expressions from scene to scene or slows the synch in a performance in order to slip a cut around an eyeblink, with ILM artists implementing his ideas at their keyboards. "I would say that at least a third of the shots in [*Clones*] have been manipulated in that way," Lucas said.[2]

Digital tools have been making inroads into filmmaking for nearly 20 years. In the mid-1980s, Lucasfilm was using proprietary digital editing systems for image and sound. For most of this time, the output was always exported back to film for conventional theatrical exhibition, but digital exhibition is now an increasing important element in the business. The number of digital screens (though still relatively small compared to conventional screens) has climbed impressively in a three-year period, going from 12 in 1999, 31 in 2000, and 45 in 2001 to 124 in 2002.[3] *Attack of the Clones* screened at 61 U.S. and Canadian locations in digital and conventional formats, and 20th Century Fox, the film's distributor, reported that business was more sustained at the digital locales.[4] On conventional screens, the film's box office dropped 47 percent in the second weekend and 64 percent in the third, whereas the decline for the digital screens was a smaller 28 percent and 45 percent. Films today perform most strongly on their opening weekends and virtually all drop off thereafter, and *Clones*' decline was not atypical of this pattern. The interesting aspect was the potential role of digital exhibition in retarding the effect. One digital screen, in Farmingdale, N.Y., generated $35,000 over the first weekend, compared with $134,000 from three local conventional screens. By the fourth weekend,

however, the digital screen's $14,500 nearly matched the $18,000 from the three conventional screens combined.

It remains to be seen whether the strong performance of the digital screens reflects a short-run curiosity about digital exhibition among viewers or will hold up over the long run. But the trend toward digital exhibition is already well established, and *Clones* is merely its most visible indicator. During summer 2001, for example, Fox released *Planet of the Apes* on both conventional and digital screens. In 2002, DreamWorks did likewise with *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* and Warner Bros. with *Scooby-Doo*. Fox extended the summer release of Spielberg's *Minority Report* into fall 2002 by adding digital screens (it had wanted to do so immediately but couldn't because the nation's digital screens were fully booked with product during the summer).

A Fox executive confirmed the studio's support for digital exhibition. "This is the wave of the future for this company and for the industry," he said. "Fox's intent is to support a continuing supply of pictures to the digital environment. This [exhibition] is one of the last areas of entertainment to be completely revolutionized as it moves into digital."[5] A Warner Bros. executive concurred, pointing out that film distribution and exhibition are being affected by digital just as acquisition and production have been.[6]

In contrast with exhibition, which is only now seeing the changes, film production and postproduction have assimilated digital methods on almost all levels. Picture and sound editing and mixing, for example, are accomplished with nonlinear systems from which film has vanished. (Footage from the camera is converted to digital video for access by a nonlinear system.) Steven Spielberg has declared that he will always edit his films on film, and this already makes him sound anachronistic, a holdout and a holdover from an earlier and now surpassed historical period.

It is in postproduction, though, that digital special effects have provided the most visible sign of the industry's transition in filmmaking methods. Special effects are the digital era's calling card, producing the most obvious and evident changes in film content and style. Indeed, the proliferation of comic-book movies, including the upcoming *Spider-Man 2, Blade: Trinity, Catwoman,* and *X Men 3,* reflects technology's ability to duplicate onscreen what before could be realized only by comic-book artists on the page. As an editor at Fantagraphics, a comic publisher, remarked, "Who wants to look at a static image of the Hulk on the printed page when you can watch a film by Ang Lee of the Hulk kicking butt?"[7] *Spider-Man*'s digital passage through the canyons of Manhattan is far more enthralling and three-dimensional than the old-fashioned matte and process work used in 1978's *Superman*.

But the rather gaudy wave of digital effects in contemporary film is just the iceberg's tip. The new technologies are transforming cinema in more subtle and important ways than with the creation of jaw-dropping imagery alone. In an important sense, this kind of extravagant effects imagery is nothing new: cinema has been invested in its creation since the era of Georges Méliès. He used papier-mâché and stop-motion tricks where filmmakers today use computers, but the mission of this kind of imagery has remained relatively constant. Not so in other areas of filmmaking. Digital is producing tremendous changes that are affecting the role and function of such traditional domains as cinematography and, more deeply, the viewer's perception of the nature of cinema.

The cinematographer, in the strictest sense, is the person who creates the image on film by controlling light, color, and composition in order to help the director achieve his or her vision. Using traditional methods, a cinematographer controls color by manipulating light levels on the set and costumes or by using colored gels over the light sources. In doing so, the cinematographer is *creating* the image in camera. He or she does so by controlling the image variables—light, shadow, contrast, color—at the point of exposure of a camera negative. This act has been essential to the ontology of cinema for much of its history, and it informs the realist aesthetic tradition advanced by André Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer, and others. Bazin, for example, emphasized the automatic way that photography seizes an image of the world:

> For the first time, between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man.[8]

Kracauer stressed photography's ability to create a visible likeness of the physical reality of the world before the camera. Even Eisenstein, no realist like these two, found the shot to be a "photo-fragment of nature."[9] For Rudolf Arnheim, film could be an art only if it overcame the camera's tendency to create a mere likeness of the visible world in front of it.

During cinema's first century, filming a scene entailed creating the image in-camera. (Composited shots, as in special effects, are an exception to this.)

Starship Troopers' extravagant digital creatures

Eisenstein, in fact, was so insistent about the power of montage because it provided a way of freeing images from the parameters imposed on them during the act of cinematography. Of course, during cinematography, the image is captured and created in *latent* form because it still needs to be developed and printed, and it can then be subjected to additional manipulation. In traditionally defined filmmaking, however, these manipulations are typically of a grosser and less specific sort. During postproduction, for example, color timing of the footage occurs in the lab by manipulating the intensity of the yellow, cyan, and magenta timing lights, and cinematographers closely supervise this because it affects the overall color balance of the image. Lab timing provides a final step in color correction, but gives filmmakers only a relatively gross level of control that affects all of the image hues at once.

Additional lab processes are available, like flashing, ENR, bleach bypass, and cross-processing, and have been much used recently. Bleach bypass and ENR are both silver-retention processes, preserving a portion of silver in the film that is typically removed during normal processing. This makes blacks darker, enhances contrast and detail, desaturates color, and provides a subtle edge enhancement around objects. Cinematographers Vittorio Storaro (*Bulworth, The Last Emperor*) and Janusz Kaminski (*Saving Private Ryan, Minority Report*) are the most visible proponents of silver retention, but the process has been used in films as diverse as *The Rookie, Evita,* and *Michael Collins*. Flashing is a means of introducing small amounts of light to a camera negative either before or after filming in order to desaturate color and pull detail out of shadow areas. Vilmos Zsigmond used it to daring effect in Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*. Cross-processing takes reversal stock (as the camera original) and processes it as a color negative, something it was not designed for. As used in *Clockers, U-Turn,* and *Get on the Bus,* it makes primary colors pop out, enhances contrast, and intensifies grain.

All of these processes work on the *entire* image at once and, in this respect, provide filmmakers with relatively blunt instruments for manipulating image elements. This bluntness is in striking contrast to the exacting manipulations that can be carried out during cinematography and its creation of images in-camera (choosing a film stock with inherent image characteristics, using lenses and light to set a focal plane, gelling lights for color, etc.). But, however blunt they may be, these postproduction processes arose, in part, as a way to revise the inherently powerful parameters of image definition during production.

The digital turn in cinema has greatly changed all of this. In regard to color timing and the control of many other image variables, digital methods now offer filmmakers greatly enhanced artistic powers compared with traditional photo-mechanical methods. One of the more outrageous scenes in the Coen brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* occurs when the gangster Baby Face Nelson machine-guns a cow. The cow (and others like it in the film) is a digital rather than a real flesh-and-blood creature, and therefore is consistent with the most evident part of the profile digital tools have assumed, namely, the creation of special effects. Granted, these cows are not the extravagant digital creatures typically associated with effects—like the *Clones* or the bugs in *Starship Troopers*. But, as an effect, they are of that ilk. Like *Clones* or bugs, they can be exterminated without real consequences to any reality in front of the camera.

There is a second way, though, that digital artistry is part of this scene, indeed, of the entire film, and it is one that remains relatively hidden to viewers. Both the road down which Nelson shoots with manic energy and the landscapes throughout the entire film are brown and dusty, and the sky is pale and drained of color. The Coens visualized the story with a kind of dustbowl look, and they had planned to shoot in Texas during the summer, which would have given them this look as a camera reality. When they switched locations to Mississippi, however, cinematographer Roger Deakins realized that the new lush, green, wet look would be inappropriate for the film's pictorial design.

The pale skies of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

The question then became one of how to achieve the appropriate dustbowl look using the Mississippi locations. The primary goal was to take the green out of the foliage, but also to cut some of the color out of the sky and give the images the look of old hand-tinted postcards. On one of his earlier films, *1984,* Deakins had used bleach bypass to striking effect. He considered using it here, but rejected the idea because a traditional silver-retention process would not give him the kind of selective control over individual image elements that he wanted.

The solution lay in subjecting the film in postproduction to a new process of digital color correction that required scanning the entire feature into digital video format and then, once the corrections were made, exporting it back to film. This gave Deakins the ability to selectively control individual colors—the critical greens of the foliage, for example—without altering other hues, which traditional methods of lab timing or silver-retention did not permit. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) is a historically important film because it was the first time that an entire major feature film was subjected to digital color correction as an ordinary part of postproduction (i.e., the goal not being the creation of evident special effects).

In 1998, director Gary Ross had digitized *Pleasantville* in order to blend black-and-white images with color. That film was shot on color stock, but the color was then partially or wholly removed from key sequences to create black-and-white and color blends. The primary goal, therefore, was to achieve a special effect by showing patches of color appearing inside a black-and-white world and then converting that black-and-white world to color. In the following year, George Lucas digitized *The Phantom Menace,* but his goals, too, were directed toward special effects, with a particular need to insert actors into shots that were otherwise all digital.

By contrast, we see in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* not the typical overt gaudiness of special effects, but something that brings us closer to traditional visual aesthetics. The filmmaker here approaches the painter's ability to control the fine details of color, shading, contrast, filtration, and other attributes of the image—*within images that can otherwise appear naturalistic*. I emphasize this latter point because it is here that the effect of digital color correction will be felt in cinema as it brings the medium closer to the kind of fine-grain aesthetic control that painters have long enjoyed. Of course, digital timing will remain an ongoing part of special-effects work, and there should be no minimizing of the artistry that is involved in special effects. But it seems likely that the viewer who encounters special effects, with their fantastic, digitalized creatures, is led to frame the image, to contextualize it cognitively, in different terms than images that appear more naturalistic. Digital timing embraces such images; it doesn't exclude them. The dustbowl look, the hand-tinted postcard quality of *O Brother,* are, of course, effects, but they do not advertise themselves as such. They do not subvert a viewer's impression of the photographable character of the images. This makes for a more powerful digital tool because its use does not require

the filmmakers to sacrifice a relative appearance of naturalism, as happens in *Pleasantville* and *The Phantom Menace*.

Deakins spent ten weeks in digital postproduction working on the color timing of *O Brother,* an unusually lengthy period for a cinematographer to remain with a project once principal cinematography has been completed. In this regard, the adoption by the industry of digital color correction as a standard part of postproduction will reconfigure the domain of cinematography and the professional relationships among members of the filmmaking team. Traditionally, cinematographers have had minimal involvement with postproduction, with the exception of the lab timing discussed earlier. Now, however, as more and more of the components of cinematography are altered or even created once principal filming is finished, cinematography is becoming a postproduction process in ways it has never been.

The Lord of the Rings

O Brother was released in 2000, and since then we have entered an era in which digital is redefining cinema at three key points: digital exhibition, the digital intermediate, and digital capture. The *O Brother* example illustrates the use of digital intermediates—a digital scan of an entire feature film, which, after image processing, is then exported back onto film. I've been describing digital color timing, but as the process has evolved, it has become more extensive. The term that the industry now uses is "digital grading," because more about the image is altered than just colors. Working with a digital intermediate on the Bruce Willis vehicle *Hart's War* (2002), for example, cinematographer Alar Kivilo darkened the skies and controlled the lighting of large areas of bright snow in night exteriors. "We could also selectively alter contrast, either in the whole shot or in specific areas of the shot," he noted.[10]

The three *Lord of the Rings* films underwent digital grading to alter colors, add filtration effects, and manipulate delicate components of the image. Colors in the Mines of Moria, for example, were desaturated to give them a sinister cast. Lavender, lilac, and salmon gels—very delicate hues to work with—were used to add a twilight effect to some scenes. Director Peter Jackson enthused about the level of control that digital grading offered him:

> The wonderful advantage of digital grading . . . is that it can go beyond what film grading can do: you can adjust gamma and contrast, but you can also vignette and isolate pieces of a shot. It's similar to film grading in terms of basic color manipulation, but you can also take a scene that was shot on a very dull, overcast day and increase the contrast, burn the highlights out, thicken the blacks, and add warmth to the highlights without adding any warmth to the shadows. In short, you can subtly make a dull, overcast scene look as though it was shot on a bright, sunny day. We could also isolate characters and apply a Pro-Mist filter to the Elvish skintones so that they'd radiate a slight glow without affecting the rest of the shot. Digital grading allows you to apply a remarkable layer of creativity to the film after you've shot it.[11]

We're a long way here from Bazinian notions of photographic realism, of a necessary connection between the photographic image and the realities that exist before the camera. Digital grading takes us from the outlook of cinema in its photo-mechanical period, in which the purpose of cinematography and on-the-set direction of actors was to create images and furnish footage for editing, and in which each of these domains had clear boundaries. Neither directing nor cinematography extended much into postproduction, and the images they created were essentially completed, as images if not as edited scenes, at the end of the production stage. By contrast, the advent of digital grading in contemporary film suggests that we now need to think of cinematography, and even directing, as *image-capture* processes. In special-effects-intensive movies, like *Spider-Man* or the *Star Wars* films, directing is merely a means for grabbing the live action elements needed for compositing with computer-generated images.

Session 9 — shot on HD

In all of this, the cinematic image is merely catching up to where sound has long been. Few of the sounds, for example, that one hears in a movie originate at the point of filming or have not been subject to further processing. Digital grading enables filmmakers to run their entire movie through a kind of Adobe Photoshop program and to continually adjust the pictorial variables in the footage as captured by their cameras. Digital-imaging methods, then, are not merely tools that filmmakers can use to create jazzy new images or neat special effects. Their usage is reconfiguring the process of film production, how things get done, when, and by whom. These are significant changes in the industrial and professional context of cinema.

The capturing process shows the nature of the medium's transition in the most striking terms. As almost everyone now realizes, film is no longer a necessary condition for cinema; an increasing number of features today are shot on digital video, to be either transferred to film for conventional exhibition or retained in digital form for digital exhibition. The most high-profile of these pictures has been *Attack of the Clones,* but George Lucas is not the only filmmaker to explore the digital alternative to conventional cinema. The Inuit epic, *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2002), was shot on DV. *The Anniversary Party* (2001), co-directed by Jennifer Jason Leigh and Alan Cumming, was shot on DV in 19 days, and it's a professional-looking film, shot by one of Hollywood's leading cinematographers, John Bailey (*Ordinary People, The Big Chill, As Good As It Gets*). The independent horror film *Session 9* (2001) was shot on HD. Barbet Schroeder's *Our Lady of the Assassins* (2001) is another prominent feature shot on DV. Schroeder was filming in the streets of Bogota, Columbia, one of the drug capitals of the world, with a high rate of drug-fueled murders. Because it is so lightweight and portable, DV enabled Schroeder to work quickly in this rather dangerous location, to get his shots and then get off the streets. The DV format is also finding its way into conventional (i.e., captured on film) pictures: Michael Mann incorporated some DV sequences into *Ali,* his biography of the boxer Muhammad Ali, which was otherwise shot on film.

As a capture medium, DV "reads" a scene very differently than film does. One of the unmistakable hallmarks of DV is its clarity and depth of field. DV tends to record everything in deep focus and with extremely sharp focus, whereas varying degrees of shallow focus are the norm for images shot on film. Most shots have a limited focal plane, as determined by the speed of the film, the f-stop and the amount of light available. Even celebrated deep-focus films also include numerous shots where the focal plane is re-

stricted. In contrast, DV produces deep focus as a kind of auto-default, and filmmakers working in the format studiously try to avoid this look. On *The Anniversary Party,* for example, John Bailey kept his cameras at a distance from the actors and the set to avoid a wide-angle look accentuating the format's video qualities.

It's tempting to speculate about what theorist André Bazin, the famous proponent of deep focus, would have made of all this. From the standpoint of film theory and aesthetics, the wide-angle look of digital video arguably fulfills the ideal for cinema that Bazin explicated, that of replicating the viewer's ontological experience of a rich, multi-plane visual world. And yet there was always an ethical component to Bazin's position. Deep-focus cinematography was significant for him because it represented a meaningful choice by filmmakers to deviate from the norm of shallow focus. Bazin found aesthetic value in that choice. When deep focus becomes the norm, however, as in DV, it may no longer convey the ethical significance that Bazin found in it. A filmmaker's choices now may center on how to avoid the deep-focus look. There was always a tension in Bazin's work between his veneration for photo-mechanically based realism and his celebration of the stylistic designs filmmakers created in order to approximate visual realism. Thus, Bazin the realist would probably have welcomed DV, while Bazin the ethicist would have mourned it.

Although the aesthetic design that many filmmakers bring to a DV film is oriented toward overcoming the video "look" and simulating a more filmic look, many attributes of digital video are working in the other direction, pulling the images away from cinematic (i.e., filmic) characteristics.

Digital video, for example, produces images that are extremely sharp, which can make it harder for filmmakers to hide the seams in their special effects shots or the make-up on performers. On *Attack of the Clones,* for example, Lucas used filters on the camera to smudge the image a little and cover up some of the stitching in composited images or the brushstrokes on an actor's make-up. But he cautioned, "You have to be very careful [because in this format] you can't get away with as much fudging as you used to."[12]

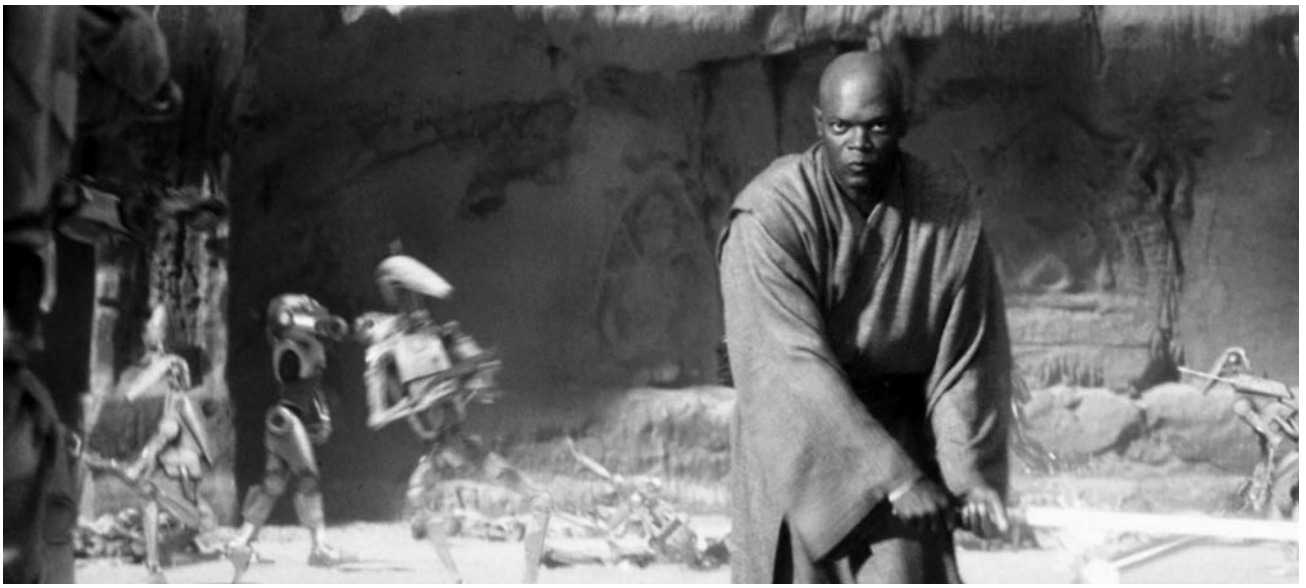
The extreme clarity of digital video is a function of its lack of grain. Grain—bits of silver halide suspended in the emulsion of a film stock—gives the celluloid image its special luminosity and vividness. The grain pattern is never the same from frame to frame, making each frame a unique visual experience even if its content—a shot of a table lamp, for example—is static. It is the constantly changing grain pattern that helps make the film image look so alive, and which also diminishes its degree of sharpness relative to DV. This is an interesting paradox. Film looks more alive than digital video, yet it doesn't have the latter's clarity. As film stocks have changed over the years, so has their grain structure, with the general movement being toward more finely grained stocks. In a perverse way, perhaps the grainlessness of digital video represents the ideal and ultimate goal of this evolution. In actuality, though, scrubbed of grain, the digital image looks unnaturally clean and shiny.

This difference shows up in some of the DVD releases of older films that have been restored, such as *Citizen Kane* and *North by Northwest*. Robert Harris, the restoration expert who worked on *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Vertigo,* concedes that these DVD releases look lovely, but he emphasizes the way that their look is uniquely different from film. Grain is our friend, Harris says.

> *Citizen Kane* and *North by Northwest* have been digitally cleaned to a point where the film grain has been removed, yielding an almost shiny, grainless image. I'm not saying that these transfers are bad. They're not. It's just that they're different, and not representative of the actual film. They are, for all intents and purposes, a modification of the film into a fully digital, video product.[13]

These instances involve material originally shot on celluloid, with its inherent grain structure, and then cleaned for digital video. The DVDs look terrific, but they don't look like film. The conversion to digital strips out vital filmic attributes. In cases where features are shot directly on DV, the differences in appearance are more striking. The trade-off in DV, in place of grain, is a flatness to the image, an unchanging cleanliness from frame to frame that registers perceptually. Interestingly, the head of R&D at Swiss Effects, a digital-transfer facility that takes DV projects to film, points out, "Almost nobody wants the clarity of digital projection—they want more grain."[14]

There are different ways to achieve this. One is to remain in the video realm but use software to add fake film grain to the DV image. There are programs that will imitate the look of different film stocks. However, this seems like a somewhat mechanical solution to the problem of how to avoid the video look. Another, more organic solution is to take advantage of the grain structure of the transfer stock when exporting a digital-video project to film for exhibition. Tom Richmond, a cinematographer on several digital films, talks about



Star Wars: Attack of the Clones

getting away from a DV look and closer to film, even though celluloid was not the means of image capture. "We used the [transfer] stocks to get to a film place that we liked. You see the little dancing film grains; it's not a video-generated fake film grain. The real film grain took over as the main texture of the film."[15] In this case, grain comes in after the fact, as it were, to supply a film look.

Clarity and depth of field are not the only differences between film and DV images. In other respects, each is the inverse of the other. Film cannot see into shadows very well, but it can register fine distinctions in brightly illuminated areas. Video can pull detail out of shadows, but sees little information in bright areas, which tend to blow out. The video cinematographer, therefore, has to be very careful with contrast, particularly at the high end of the light curve. On *Session 9,* the cinematographer, Uta Briesewitz, felt that "the highlights were a dead giveaway that it was video" because they kept blowing out.[16] In situations where she was shooting a character in a room with a window, she had to reduce the contrast range by lighting the room a bit more and reducing some of the exterior light coming through the window. This strategy reduced the video look that otherwise would have resulted. The fires and snowy landscapes in *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* frequently lose all detail because DV doesn't capture these highlights, which film could handle quite well because it is not as sensitive to overexposure.

There are other visual differences between film and DV. Film has motion blur; video does not. Moreover, panning movements in digital video will tend to strobe in a distracting manner (on *Attack of the Clones,* George Lucas avoided panning the camera to follow running figures). Still other differences could be cited, but the point here is that at a perceptual level, the nature and meaning of cinema is being transformed because the information in light—its gamma, contrast, black values, highlights, clarity, and filtration—and the compositional strategies and movements on the part of the camera necessary for executing shots are perceived differently by film and video. These differences are passed on to the viewer, where they influence the nature and quality of the visual experience.

The profound impact of the shift to video will lie not in the gaudy special effects and fantasy creatures that capture so much media attention, but in the perceptual registration of light information, first as the images are captured and then as the values read by the capture device are in turn read by the viewer. We are accustomed to thinking about cinema in terms of its content and its formal devices, and to regarding these as embodying its essential structural characteristics. From this standpoint, movies will continue to tell stories using editing, camera movement, lighting, and sound, whether on celluloid or digital video. But the quality and character of light itself, and the perceptual experiences it induces in viewers, provides perhaps the most integral conception of the medium, and it is here—in the nature of the light-induced perceptual experience—that the medium is transforming most radically.

Cinema in the new millennium is in transition from one mode of perceptual registration to another, and one of the striking ironies of this in-between period lies in

the efforts of digital filmmakers to retain a film look, by controlling highlights and depth of field and simulating grain, even as that medium is disappearing. Even George Lucas does this, composing his shots with characters and objects bisected by the frame lines in order to avoid a completely processed look. In long-range terms, though, this is mainly a nostalgic drive, an attempt to retain a part of the past in a present that is outdistancing it. Film is a warmer medium than DV, just as music recorded on LP sounds warmer than on CD. But now it's only the high-end audiophiles who care about this distinction; everyone else happily buys CDs or burns music onto them. The same scenario will play out in cinema, with DV's clear, clean look in time establishing the norm and the conditions for acceptance and even affection by viewers. The soft, grainy, slightly hazy look of film will seem as strange to future generations of viewers as the hot, sharp DV look seems to us now.

I mentioned earlier that digital imaging has reconfigured cinema at three critical points or locales—capture, grading, and exhibition. If we think of the medium's transition in these terms, it's clear that these three locales form a continuum of time and space, from which film—a celluloid strip run through camera or projector—is vanishing. From capture to processing to exhibition, film is no longer strictly necessary, and as it vanishes, so, too, will the meaning and experience of cinema and its essential characteristics, as these are invested in a particular and present structure of perception. When digital-video versions of movies first appeared in consumer format on DVD (circa 1997 and 1998), it was common for reviewers of disks to complain about digital artifacting—ringing or haloing resulting from an over-sharpened image, or pixelizing and color blocking in large, undefined areas of the image such as shadow, fog, or mist. By contrast, in cinema's first century, it never occurred to anyone to complain about "film artifacts" because the medium was an only child. A splice over a tear in the film was just a splice. It wasn't an "artifact." An emulsion scratch, however ugly, was just that, a scratch.

As DVD authoring has improved, one hears fewer remarks about video artifacts. But a new genre of complaint has arisen among younger viewers of the format. On Web pages and discussion forums, viewers complain about strange-looking lines and flecks and dots that sometimes appear in the video image. "What are these?," they ask. These are, of course, scratches and emulsion flecks on the film original used for the DVD, and grains in the camera stock—all familiar enough to those of us who grew up watching cinema on film. But to younger viewers, for whom cinema is a video experience, these are filmic artifacts, odd vestiges of a medium that for them is prehistoric. It's routine, now, when authoring a DVD release of a movie, especially an older one, to run a software program that will erase scratches and flecks of dirt from the image. Actually, we should be retaining these things, not erasing them. On the shiny, silver DVD disk they are all that remain of cinema as a material medium, reminders of the medium's physical state in its pre-millennial form. To those of us who loved the medium in this incarnation, let's celebrate the dirt, the scratches, the grain, greet them as old friends when we encounter them on DVD. In the clean, crystal-clear, and diamond-sharp world of digital video, they are the ghostly traces of our former love, artifacts of the stuff that dreams once were made of.

Stephen Prince, Professor of Communication at Virginia Tech, has written and edited numerous books on cinema, of which the most recent is *Classical Film Violence: Designing and Regulating Brutality in Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1969*.

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Abstract The tools of digital filmmaking are transforming all aspects of cinema, including production, postproduction, and exhibition. In the process, they are altering the visual characteristics of the moving image and changing the viewer's perceptual understanding of the nature of cinema, leading to the emergence, for the first time in the medium's history, of filmic artifacts.

Dudley Andrew

Amélie, or Le Fabuleux Destin du Cinéma Français

After a sojourn in Hollywood, where he turned a profit on the $70 million *Alien: Resurrection,* a film that opened on 2,500 U.S. screens and then played to millions of spectators across Europe and Asia, Jean-Pierre Jeunet expressly renounced the global. He made a pact with himself to contribute to the national heritage of French cinema, Hollywood's longest and staunchest rival, returning with affection to the local, to "the Paris of my youth, a fairy-tale Paris."[1] In fact, Jeunet's youth was spent in Lorraine, not Paris, and Paris for that matter is as much a world city—indeed as much a cinema city—as Los Angeles. Still, his intention was clear: Jeunet would counter the scale of the international action-picture with the winsome intimacy of the French romance.[2] For a full century French cinema has exploited two different faces of intimacy: that of good taste and stylish fashion on the one hand, and that of personal authenticity on the other. Imagine French cinema as literally a face, one that is elegantly made up as in the *cinéma de qualité* and one that is daringly unmasked by the likes of Godard, Rouch, Garrel, and Dumont. Jeunet knows all about makeup, and

Jeanne Moreau takes off her makeup in Jules et Jim

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Amélie takes notes from Jules et Jim

in *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* he succeeded in enticing spectators everywhere with a "look" they found at once delectable and personal. *Amélie,* as the film is known in the United States, grossed even more than *Alien: Resurrection,* and on a $10 million investment. It contributed to France's briefly overtaking Hollywood in home box-office receipts, while worldwide it restored faith in that nation's precocious instinct for film art.

Precocity is exactly what the film advertises in its prologue, particularly in the litany of "likes" and "don't likes" that define the style and personality of each character. When the litany comes around to Amélie, she plays up to us, typing herself as a film spectator with a prehensile eye: "I like noticing details that no one else does . . . ," she whispers from her seat in a movie theater. And to prove it, she isolates an accident visible in a famous shot from Truffaut's *Jules et Jim,* an insect that somehow made its way into the frame, crawling toward Jeanne Moreau's sensuous mouth just as it opens to receive Jim's tender kiss. Truffaut caught the insect by surprise; or, rather, the insect caught Truffaut by surprise. I recently asked cinematographer Raoul Coutard about this "mistake." It was, he claimed, the by-product of a miracle where the natural world (an unexpected and extraordinarily beautiful morning light) lined up with the fictional one.[3] Working hastily before the light evaporated, Coutard framed the lovers in silhouette only to have the insect make its unbidden entry. The shot was so expressive that Truffaut never considered a retake. This kind of happenstance was dreamt of by the Surrealists.

The Surrealists, just like Amélie, used to scan the movie screen, hunting for details unseen even by the director, exercising what Christian Keathley has dubbed "panoramic perception."[4] Shot with an anamorphic format (2.35:1) to promote just this sort of perception and to encourage such miracles of the image, *Jules et Jim* is resurrected by Jean-Pierre Jeunet to bless his effort. Indeed, Jeunet uses the same wide-aspect ratio, and he models his "Prologue" on Truffaut's, as a cascade of delightful yet distinct vignettes is channeled into a gushing stream by the narrator's rapid-fire voiceover.

"Are women magic?" asks Jean-Pierre Léaud in Truffaut's *La Nuit américaine,*[5] displacing the question that ever haunted the New Wave: "Are movies magic"? *Amélie* re-echoes these questions in a post-feminist age, grabbing the baton from the New Wave and bounding with energy into a second century of Franco-American competition. Carrying that baton from one era to the next is Claire Maurier, Antoine Doinel's dissatisfied mother in *The 400 Blows,* whom Jeunet tapped to play his worldly-wise café owner. Her café on rue Lepic may well be situated close to where Jean-Pierre Léaud spied his mother—this same Claire Maurier—kissing her lover. And Amélie, for that matter, may live in a building adjacent to the dingy Doinel apartment in the Clichy neighborhood.

And so in his first "outdoor" film, Jeunet celebrates the breakout of the New Wave from the studio and onto the streets. In the most exuberant scene of *The 400 Blows,* the Doinel family—mother, son, and stepfather—pack themselves into the car for a carefree drive around the city after seeing a film that they visibly

Casting
and crediting
Claire Maurier

Paris belongs
to Amélie

The fresh face of Zazie (Zazie dans le Métro)

The adolescent innocence of Cybèle
(Sundays and Cybèle)

enjoy. The title on the marquee of the Gaumont-Palace reads—optimistically, as it turns out—*Paris nous appartient*. For, when Truffaut's film premiered, Jacques Rivette was still struggling to finish his debut feature. But Rivette's title (*Paris Belongs to Us*) had for some time been a battle cry at *Cahiers du cinéma.* And indeed, in 1959 Paris really did belong to this cohort, to Truffaut and Rivette and to their friends, so many of whom were ready to test new portable cameras (the Éclair), mobile tape recorders (the Nagra III became available that year), and a revamped state-subsidy formula that ranked imaginative scripts over track record. Crews and location scouts from *Le Signe du lion* (Rohmer), *Les Cousins* (Chabrol), *A Bout de souffle* (Godard), *Pickpocket* (Bresson), and *La Tête contre les murs* (Franju) might well have run into each other, as these and scores of debut features in the heady first two years of the New Wave situated their youthful dramas in a begrimed but photogenic Paris.

Audrey Tautou, as Amélie Poulain, traverses these same streets, but she does so with a more sprightly gait and against a brighter background (for in the mid-60s André Malraux, as Minister of Cultural Affairs, ordered the buildings of the capital cleansed). Jeunet went a step further than Malraux, vigorously varnishing his colorful images and making them bounce to an upbeat score that emphasizes traditional French instrumentation. So, if in citing Truffaut at the outset, Jeunet winks at the New Wave, wanting to assume its pride of place, he also sets himself in opposition to its earnest and often dark self-absorption. "The Nouvelle Vague was—ugh!—terrible, really terrible for French cinema," he said. "Growing up, I got so bored with all these sad stories, films about couples fighting in their kitchen for two hours. Please, give us a break!"[6] What did he have in mind? Couples do fight throughout Rivette's *L'Amour fou* and frequently in Godard's *Le Mépris,* though not in the kitchen. In any case, from Jeunet's own efforts, we can be sure that he disparages sustained dialogue and found sets. Born in 1953, he belongs to a second- or third-wave youth movement, one that grew up on the attention-grabbing, attention-shifting, and short-attention aesthetic of TV advertising. Only one film in the New Wave period vibrates with the verve of this aesthetic: Louis Malle's *Zazie dans le Métro*. The fresh face of Zazie, like that of Amélie, so innocent yet mischievous, invites us to rediscover an overly familiar city. We are primed to fall for these girls, for their Paris, and for the cinema that brings both to life so vividly. But *Zazie* sits in the far penumbra of the New Wave, not even appearing in Jean Douchet's recent history of the movement.[7] Indeed, he would not recommend it when it premiered; nor would Eric Rohmer. Rivette was harsher still.[8] On the other hand, André Labarthe reviewed *Zazie* respectfully in *Cahiers'* famous Brecht issue,[9] and Truffaut even used it as the paradigmatic example of "le tendence Queneau," one of the three spokes of the New Wave wheel to which also belongs his own *Shoot the Piano Player*.[10] His ambivalence shows in his letters, however. Louis Malle's film, he worries, is half-good, half-bad. What would Truffaut have thought of *Amélie*?

Truffaut's legacy still survives at *Cahiers,* as different as its editorial policy and reading public may be today; for it came down harshly on *Amélie*.[11] The magazine's dismissal is reminiscent of its reaction years ago to another faux nouvelle-vague hit to which *Amélie* bears some resemblance, the 1962 *Sundays and Cybèle*. Although the fetching adolescent innocence of Patricia Gozzi and the lyricism of Henri Decaë's cinematography and Maurice Jarre's music carried Serge Bourguignon's film to the foreign film Oscar the next year, *Cahiers* wrote snidely of it: "Nothing in the look, everything in the smile. To please is its major obsession. It doesn't matter whether what it shows is false, unseemly, or stupid, so long as it's done prettily. There is no cliché this film recoils from, whether it be poetic, literary or cinematographic."[12]

Cahiers has always warned of New Wave counterfeits, usually ingratiating films like *Black Orpheus,* pummeled both by Godard as completely inauthentic[13] and by Truffaut for seducing audiences through mindless sentimentality.[14] Such films may exude freshness and freedom on the faces of their invariably winsome ingénues, but they are carefully calculated to do so. Jacques Demy protected *Umbrellas of Cherbourg* from this charge through explicit generic mimicry,[15] while Agnès Varda tainted her fashion-page film, *Le Bonheur,* with venomous irony. The New Wave repudiated showy style that panders to facile feeling, a temptation whenever Paris is "discovered" through the eyes of a disingenuous child or adolescent. They preferred the Paris of Jean-Pierre Melville's *Bob le flambeur,* whose jaded hero winds his way from Montmartre down through Clichy after a long night, sidestepping the debris being washed down the sewers at dawn. "Is Paris (is cinema) magic?" indeed! Prior to 1960, a short like *The Red Balloon* managed to keep in check its "cinema magic" (its *trucage*), allowing the spectator to conjure a magic-realist Paris; this is what André Bazin famously praised.[16] And *Zazie,* thanks to Queneau's irreverent novel, saucily—indeed annoyingly—throws technique like argot at the audience.[17]

"I believe that every shot should be like a painting"

Compared to these, *Amélie* appears unctuous, feigning spontaneity.

The point is that even though many spectators feel *Amélie* work its magic on them, nothing magical entered its production. Controlling every element of sound and picture, determining it all in an unalterable script and storyboard, Jeunet engineered his fantasy with the precision of a watchmaker, each shot milled to move into position so as to engage the subsequent shot without friction. Truffaut, by contrast, sought friction at every stage of his productions.[18] The script of each of his first three films he found too easy to accept, and so during shooting he would work against the tone of what he had written. Jeanne Moreau's character in *Jules and Jim,* utterly lovable on paper, he complicated, making her difficult to put up with toward the end; she remains mysterious and ambiguous even today. But there is no mystery in Audrey Tautou's character, nor in Jeunet's film, except in those black-and-white videos Amélie sends to the reclusive painter Dufayal: babies swimming in slow motion, a blues singer, a peg-legged black man doing a soft-shoe. Did he introduce these germs of gritty video to contaminate the self-satisfaction of his carefully made-up celluloid images? Disturbed by this message from a world outside his studio, Dufayal returns with renewed inspiration to his version of Renoir's *Le Déjeuner des canotiers,* determined to capture the mystery of one figure, "the girl holding the glass," whose depth escapes him. Amélie, looking on from the rear plane, holds a glass. Somehow Jeunet restrained what must have been his impulse to zoom in on her hand.

Unlike Truffaut, and unlike Dufayal, Jeunet is an untormented artist; in his world everything can be represented, each mystery fully explicated. Indeed, the mechanism of discovery constitutes the chief pleasure of his aesthetic, rather like Amélie's practical jokes, cleverly designed so as to be dramatically unveiled. She entices one unsuspecting character, a man called Bretodeau, to a phone booth and to an encounter with his childhood treasure box as she watches from the wings; she interrupts the broadcast of a soccer match; she exhumes a conjugal love by constructing, then posting, a 20-year-old lost letter. Even the film's one deep mystery, that of the phantom figure of the photomat, is explained in a trice at the end, but only after Amélie elaborately arranges an intrigue to force Nino, the young man who will become her boyfriend, to confront the source of the photos that haunt him. He discovers not a phantom, but a Wizard of Oz—the master of the apparatus—the photomat service man.

I take this service man to be Jeunet himself, a filmmaker who treats his medium as a photomat. He glues together strips of actors posing (24 poses a second, one might say) until they seem to move. And the album that holds these photos—the album whose loss and recovery trigger the love story—is the alpha and omega of the movie. Serving as storyboard and découpage, and as the casting agent's portfolio, this album returns to comprise the tail credits, validating at the end the integrity of the original idea. In sum, the film from start to finish is *contained* in the album. Jeunet's cinema may thus be said to animate the publicity stills that are irrevocably inscribed in his storyboard.[19]

"I believe that every shot should be like a painting," Jeunet has said,[20] whereas Truffaut is on record as having little feeling for fine art. He avoided museums. He once accused his nemesis Antonioni of trying to turn every shot into a painting, draining his films of spontaneity. In *Red Desert* Antonioni did in fact paint the grass as well as the buildings that he found on location near Ravenna; and in this Jeunet is his disciple: "We cleared the streets of all cars, cleaned the graffiti off the walls, replaced posters with more colorful ones. Let's just say I tried to exert as much control as I could upon the city's aesthetic quality. And working with digital postproduction was great because we were able to make changes all the way to the last moment, to the final frame."[21] He could, for instance, have introduced a fly on Audrey Tautou's cheek, but of course he went the other direction; in postproduction he cleansed each image until it shone with the luminescence of the film's advertising posters. As the *Sight and Sound* review exults: "Beautiful images of cobble stone streets and steep Parisian stairways, corner bakeries and street markets abound; along with picture postcard views of Notre Dame, Le Sacré Coeur, the Pont des Arts, Parisian roofscapes, intimate cafés, and art nouveau Métro stations. . . . Inhabiting these locations are the 'little people' of Paris whose predecessors also populated the films of Renoir, Carné, and René Clair."[22]

To this iconography of poetic realism Jeunet adds characters right out of Jacques Prévert's cast of dreamers, closeted artists, predestined lovers, and scurrilous

Depth-perception
–two girls
holding glasses

Bretodeau finds
his treasure box

The photo ta lbum
ass tory board

Skipping stones on the Canal St. Martin —> (Amélie)

Arguing by the Canal St. Martin (Hôtel du Nord)

Dancing (Le Million)

Still(ed) shot: Jeanne Moreau (Jules and Jim)

← "The Amélie Poster Concept"

right-wing shopkeepers. Prévert even invented a character named Destin for Carné's *Les Portes de la nuit* (1946). Whether fateful or "fabuleux," Destiny rules the Paris of poetic realism just as he does the Paris of *Amélie*. Jeunet pays homage to Carné when Amélie skips stones on the Canal St. Martin, where Arletty and Louis Jouvet argued so unforgettably in *Hôtel du Nord* (1938). The hotel of that film, like Les Deux Moulins in *Amélie*, serves as a gathering place where characters tie up and disentangle multiple strands of subplots. Alexandre Trauner rebuilt this hotel in the studio, just as he rebuilt Carné's Paris in other films, including a full-scale model of the Barbès-Rochechouart Métro station for *Les Portes de la nuit*. When he designed Luc Besson's *Subway* in 1985, Trauner brought the poetic-realist look to *le cinéma du look*.

Years ago Bazin characterized Trauner's way of working: meticulously copy a genuine location, fill the set with everything that might conceivably belong to it, then remove all inessential items, so as to make the set pulse with the intense participation of every remaining element, every beam of light, every shadow.[23] Jeunet, who clearly graduated from the school of poetic realism, adopted this aesthetic for the studio-made *Delicatessen* (1991), his Occupation-era nightmare, though overloading it in neo-Baroque fashion to engender a pervasive and sinister claustrophobia. In moving outdoors for *Amélie,* Jeunet both brightens his palette and widens his purview. Yet a patina glosses the image as though this Paris had been constructed in the studio,[24] like the Paris trilogy of the first master of that poetic realism, René Clair: *Quatorze Juillet, Le Million,* and the film that *Amélie* delights to update, *Sous les toits de Paris*. For one thing, *Sous les toits de Paris* was the first sound film to outscore Hollywood in worldwide box-office receipts and critical reception. Jeunet happily has taken up its subject and something of its aesthetic in hopes of duplicating its success.

"Choreographer of the cinema," Marcia Butzel called René Clair,[25] finding that he synchronized every register and element in a 90-minute glide around obstacles on a Parisian stage set. That glide reached an apotheosis in the madcap theater scene of *Le Million,* where intersecting plots, characters, and styles of music crisscross under the benevolent eye of Père Tulipe, who sorts things out in the end. Precision of movement and of framing provides Clair with units that he concatenates in a rhythmic montage to transform daily activities into ballet.

Amélie carries this aesthetic. You can feel it in the sheer number of its elements, over 300 separate shots in the 25-minute prologue alone (by comparison, fewer than 400 shots comprise *The 400 Blows* all told). At such a rate, each shot must make its impact instantly. This means there can be no extraneous action in the frame, no competing visual features—"one idea per shot" being his motto.[26] Hence Jeunet often frames his figures front and center, even zooming and adding "whooshes" on the soundtrack to punctuate what counts. Static shots tend to freeze into what could be versions of the film's advertising posters, designed for quick and maximum effect. Indeed, disc two of the French DVD set provides a visual essay called "les projets d'affiches" ("The Amélie Poster Concept"), a suite of designs featuring Audrey Tautou, the model whom Jeunet chose the instant he saw her picture on a huge billboard while driving near Clichy. The New Wave directors, particularly Truffaut and Godard, might also freeze stars in publicity poses (Jeanne Moreau interrupting the domino game in *Jules et Jim*) but only to contrast this with the lethargic look of the everyday. Given his training in advertising, Jeunet cannot abide the tempo of the everyday; even the drab is picturesque when narrated by someone concerned with "fabulous destiny." Jeunet found his title in a 1942 Sacha Guitry film, *Le Destin fabuleux de Désirée Clary*.[27] As was his wont, Guitry both played the leading role (Napoleon) and told the tale in voiceover, bringing to life his royal cast of characters from a virtual portrait gallery. Jeunet has taken something from him, indeed quite a lot, as a look at the opening sequence of *The Story of a Cheat* (1936) reveals.[28]

Jeunet's motto: one idea per shot

Jeunet's opening, like Truffaut's and Guitry's, employs a dizzying suite of discrete anecdotes. A life-long penchant for keeping index cards of peculiar observations feeds his prologue with the bizarre. Each shot, as cleanly individuated as a playing card, seems pulled from a deck to be dealt rhythmically and in precise sequence. Most of *Amélie*'s shots are marked with distinct beginning and ending points to allow neighboring shots to couple in a train of micro-occurrences. The soundtrack emphasizes this tactic, as virtually every scene and many individual shots conclude with audible finality.

. . . breaking the crusts on crème brûlée

. . . sucking strawberries on fingertips

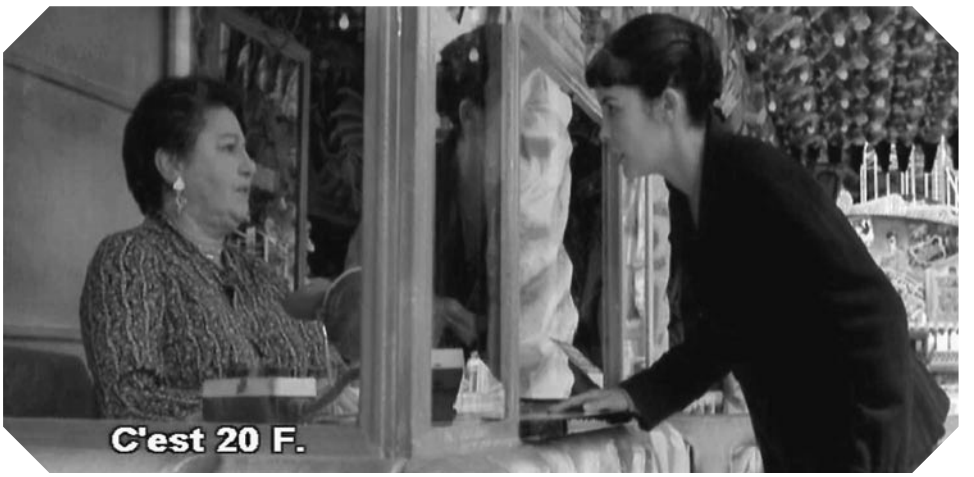
. . . tumbling dominoes

In this way Jeunet repeatedly produces the satisfaction of closure in the prologue. One character is addicted to popping bubble wrap, another cracks his joints. Bretodeau masticates the perfectly cut morsel of roast chicken, while Amélie loves to break the crust on *crème brûlée*. Each of these tics registers a minute dramatic achievement distinctly heard and felt as a membrane gives way to deliberate pressure. Such are the infantile pleasures of surface effects (skipping stones on water). Being so conclusive, these micro-moments can be lined up in sequence, whether as a long row of strawberries on fingertips or on a sheet of plastic bubbles . . . or as a sinuous line of dominoes. I take those tumbling dominoes—the film's first image—to figure the cinematic strategy of one shot falling into the next, which brings its neighbor to fall until the entire suite renders the pleasure of patterned finality. Of course dominoes have to be milled to be homogeneous, then lined up just so. This is the function of the storyboard from which, the DVD commentary explains, the shooting does not deviate. A *Cahiers du cinéma* editorial nastily noted that ambivalence is forbidden in every shot of *Amélie*.[29] Each element must function predictably and each character must exhibit precise likes and dislikes before participating in what are truly the "machinations" of the plot. Amélie skips across the surface of the world, ricocheting like a stone, never sinking.[30]

Amélie's ingenious tricks depend on just such a Newtonian physics. She lines up a sequence of elements, each of which is put in play by its predecessor to serve as a relay or armature in the machine. Recall how she entices Nino at Sacré Coeur, using a phone booth, a statue, chalk markers, and a telescope in just the proper order of discovery. Or think of the mischievous machines by which she tortures the greengrocer. Beginning with the alarm clock, she systematically alters his routine of repeated actions until he is ultimately deposited in front of his stall in the middle of the night. In effect, Amélie is an engineer of the spiritual plane. And beyond her, Dufayal the artist looks on, a figure for Jeunet himself, who, sexless and reclusive, engineers a most fabulous erotic destiny for this angel.

Dufayal—like Père Tulipe in *Le Million* or Godochot in Beneix's *Diva*—is potent, benevolent, supremely surveillant. All three films test the prowess of their creators in key scenes of runaway action. In *Le Million,* Clair orchestrates the mayhem of a struggle for a coat containing a lottery ticket on the opera stage. In *Diva,* a motorbike careens around, then under, Paris, into the bowels of the Métro. As for Amélie, she climbs aboard a car on tracks at the amusement park where Nino works behind the scenes. This attraction is an allegory of the methods and pleasures of cinema. A paying spectator, Amélie is transported into a

Amélie skips across the surface of the world



. . . buying the ticket

The ride on the funhouse car

The story board at opt the car

Riding into some one else's pilot (Nino's)

world constructed to amuse, frighten, and astonish her. A tenuous narrative literally motivates the wax or plastic figures she encounters around each bend; they reach toward her threateningly in a precisely timed sequence of special effects. Then the real-life Nino jumps on the back of her car to give her what is the thrill of her life. At the film's end, he sits in the driver's seat of his moto, while Amélie smiles, happy to have been put at last into someone else's plot, rolling and unrolling in a Paris full of other fabulous destinies.

But is this not the Paris that Jacques Tati had already satirized in *Playtime,* a film far more complex than *Amélie* in its concatenation of sounds and criss-crossing characters? Tati displayed a picture-postcard Paris, but with comic obliquity: Sacré Coeur and the Eiffel tower are merely glimpsed when reflected in windows of the suburban office buildings that have become the new center of the capital. *Amélie,* by contrast, paints a Paris of yesteryear, shielding the camera from its unsightly outskirts. Not only is La Défense (Tati's target) invisible to the west, no one would suspect that dreary housing projects, home mainly to immigrants, lie just beyond Montmartre. Jamel Debbouze, the Moroccan comic actor who plays the stuttering Lucien, is anything but threatening; he adores Amélie, as does Nino, played by Mathieu Kassovitz, who directed *La Haine* (*Hate*) in those same projects in 1995.

The film's ethnic whitewashing of Paris triggered a spiteful debate in France, left aside here. I am concerned instead with the mascara this movie applied to a sullied city, and with the movie's own "makeup," including its selective use of a national cinematic heritage. From my perspective, French cinema has been most compelling and complex when, as in *Jules et Jim,* it both acknowledges and strips away its makeup. Smudges mark a rift between face and soul that, ever since the New Wave, has been traced by significant French films, such as *Passion, L'Ami de mon amie, A nos amours,* and *Sans toit ni loi*. *Amélie,* by contrast, is pure face, albeit a face that makes you smile.

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Notes

1. Jean-Pierre Jeunet, cited in Daniel Zalewski, "Going Sweet and Sentimental Has Its Rewards," *New York Times,* October 28, 2001.
2. Jeunet's next project, however, is the $50 million comedy, *A Very Long Engagement,* starring once again Audrey Tautou. Produced by an affiliate of Warner Bros., it has received government subsidies, igniting a furious debate over "global French" status. See *Le Monde,* September 13, 2003.
3. Raoul Coutard, interview with the author, February 27, 2003, New Haven.
4. Christian Keathley adapts this concept from Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Railway Journey* (New York: Urizen, 1979) in his doctoral dissertation, "The Wind in the Trees: Cinephilia and Film Theory" (University of Iowa, 2000).
5. As early as *Shoot the Piano Player,* Truffaut put this line in the mouth of the crude bar owner when he has the hero in a lethal headlock.
6. Jean-Pierre Jeunet, *New York Times,* October 28, 2001.
7. Jean Douchet, *French New Wave* (New York: Hazan, 1998).
8. "Le Conseil du dix," in *Cahiers du cinéma* 114 (December 1960).
9. *Cahiers du cinéma* 114 (December 1960).
10. *Le Cinéma selon François Truffaut,* ed. Anne Gillain (Paris: Flammarion, 1988), 51.
11. Charles Tesson, "Lara contre *Amélie,*" in *Cahiers du cinéma* 559 (July/August 2001).
12. "160 cinéastes," in the special Nouvelle Vague issue of *Cahiers du cinéma* 138 (December 1962).
13. Jean-Luc Godard, *Godard on Godard* (New York: Viking, 1972), 151.
14. Truffaut expresses his anger that *Black Orpheus* should have taken so many honors (the Oscar for best foreign film) and so much box office from *400 Blows*. See his *Correspondence 1945-1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), 156.
15. Demy scholar Susan Weiner believes that *Cahiers,* and especially Demy's close friend Godard, appreciated Demy's dynamic movement from the aesthetics of a popular genre like the musical toward something beyond it (note to the author, September 2003).
16. Actually, André Bazin would have demoted *Amélie* below *Le Ballon rouge* for its reliance on montage and digitized techniques. See "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage," in *What Is Cinema*? (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967). Lamorisse, however, fell into the trap of cynical manipulation when he tried to capitalize on his famous short in 1961 with *Le Voyage au ballon,* which Truffaut excoriated. See his *Correspondence 1945-1984*, 151.
17. A short article in *Cahiers du cinéma* 107 (May 1960): 42, details some of these in a tone of awe.
18. Truffaut used contradiction strategically, starting from something common to arrive at something complex. See *Le Cinéma selon François Truffaut,* 138.
19. Both Jeunet and his cameraman, Bruno Debonnet, insist on the priority of the storyboard in "The Look of *Amélie*." Featurette, disc two of DVD, *Amélie* (zone 1 version only).
20. Jeunet in the *New York Times,* October 28, 2001.

21. Jeunet, *New York Times,* October 28, 2001. See also "The Look of *Amélie,*" where Debonnet insists both on Jeunet's allergy to the contingencies of location shooting and to his obsession with the control provided by digital timing.
22. *Sight and Sound* (October 2001): 23.
23. André Bazin, "Le Jour se lève," in *Regards neufs sur le cinéma* (Paris: Cerf, 1953), 150.
24. "Even if it's dark, it must be shiny," says cameraman Debonnet in "The Look of *Amélie*."
25. Marcia Butzel, "Movement as Cinematic Narration: The Concept and Practice of Choreography in Film," doctoral dissertation (University of Iowa, 1984).
26. Jean-Pierre Jeunet, in "The Look of *Amélie*."
27. Jean-Pierre Jeunet, "Interview" on disk 2 of the DVD.
28. *The Story of a Cheat* was also a favorite of both Jean-Pierre Melville and Truffaut.
29. Charles Tesson, "Lara contre *Amélie*."
30. By contrast, as Anne Gillain brilliantly notes, Antoine Doinel in *The 400 Blows* would enter into the unseen body of Paris, his true mother . . . as when, after drinking milk from a filched bottle, he shoves it through a sewer grate and listens to it shatter somewhere under the streets. See Gillain, "Les 400 Coups" in Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau, eds., *French Film: Texts and Contexts* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Abstract Quoting Truffaut's *Jules and Jim, Amélie* claims to be a new New Wave film. Instead, its calculated style returns to 1930s Poetic Realism and *Under the Roofs of Paris*. With spontaneity and complexity stripped from character and city alike, *Amélie* delivers merely a pleasurable fantasy of infantile satisfactions.

Reviews

The Life of Jesus (La Vie de Jésus)

Director/writer: Bruno Dumont. Producers: Jean Bréhat, Rachid Bouchareb. Cinematographer: Philippe Vanleeuw. Sound: Eric Rophe. Editor: Guy Lecorme. Tadrart Films.

Fig. 1: Landscape with moped

Following Robert Bresson's retirement in 1983, it appeared that his legacy, and that of the New Wave in general, might wither away as mass-market filmmakers such as Luc Besson and Jean-Jacques Beineix, supported by then Minister of Culture Jack Lang, steered French cinema toward a Hollywood model of production emphasizing profitability and entertainment. Although this so-called *cinéma du look,* exemplified most recently by the international hit *Amélie,* has continued to thrive and expand its market share, since the mid-1990s a "new New Wave" of young French and Belgian directors has successfully revived the French tradition of independent production values, aesthetic innovation, and social engagement with a flood of provocative films: Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's *The Promise* (1996), *Rosetta* (1999), and *The Son* (2002); Eric Zonca's *The Dreamlife of Angels* (1998) and *The Little Thief* (1999); Gaspar Noé's *One Against All* (1998) and *Irreversible* (2002); Catherine Breillat's *Romance* (1999) and *Fat Girl* (2001).

This second New Wave first crystallized around Mathieu Kassovitz's surprise hit *La Haine* (*Hate,* 1995). However, the abundance of attention afforded *Hate* and the directors who followed Kassovitz had the unfortunate side effect of obscuring an equally seminal film in the development of French cinema's new social realism: Bruno Dumont's *La Vie de Jésus* (*The Life of Jesus,* 1997). Unfortunately, the arcane style and limited commercial exposure of Dumont's work has relegated him to the margins of the movement in much the same way that Truffaut and Godard overshadowed Bresson during the first New Wave.

Thematically, *Hate* and *The Life of Jesus* have much in common. Both offer starkly realistic portraits of young men caught in a web of aimlessness, despair, and frustration that eventually leads to murder. Yet beyond this superficial similarity, the films could not be more different in their visual aesthetic, narrative style, and philosophical content. Following Godard and Truffaut, Kassovitz lays bare the failure of French social institutions and their role in perpetuating delinquency. Dumont, taking his cue from Bresson, eschews sociological analysis in favor of metaphysical reflection.[1] By painting a raw, naturalistic portrait of teenage malaise and delinquency, *The Life of Jesus* reinvents Bresson for the fin de siècle, echoing his elliptical, minimalist, starkly materialist style and his search for grace in a world overwhelmed by depravity and suffering. Dumont similarly challenges viewers to question their own sense of ethics and to rethink the roles that condemnation, compassion, and cinema itself play in contemporary society.

Born in 1958, Bruno Dumont was completely unknown before the release of *The Life of Jesus*. He came to filmmaking in a roundabout way, choosing to study philosophy after being refused admittance to the Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques (IDHEC), France's national film school. In 1985, despite his full-time job as a professor of *culture générale* at a vocational high school in Lille and complete lack of experience, Dumont placed a newspaper ad offering his services as a filmmaker. He attracted several clients and began shooting commercials and short documentaries for local businesses. The 40 or so films he made over the next decade, which covered topics ranging from the operation of electronic surveillance systems to the fabrication of candy, allowed him to learn the basic techniques of moviemaking. In 1993 Dumont made his first independent film, a short feature titled *Paris-Paris*, which he later described as a "dead end, too estheticized, formal, and intellectual" to be meaningful for spectators.[2]

Dumont's inspiration for making *The Life of Jesus* came from his self-professed intellectual "fascination" with the history of Christ's image in art, his philosophy studies, and his Jesuit education, which he renounced at age 20 "because its expression through the Church was no longer applicable to the world in which I was living."[3] However, the most immediate impetus behind the film was the conviction, expressed repeatedly to Dumont by his high-school students, that religion no

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longer had any relevance for them. He conceived *The Life of Jesus* as a response to this attitude: "I wanted to confront the real lives, pain, and misery of these young people, whom adult society has virtually abandoned and who no longer have anything to guide them."[4]

Dumont borrowed his title from the French philosopher Ernest Renan's 1863 biography of Christ, a work of positivist historiography that presents Jesus as a visionary yet thoroughly mortal leader around whom supernatural narratives were later spun. The film's guiding premise is also taken from Renan: Jesus was not a divinity, but a simply a man, grotesque and sublime like all other human beings, whose life should in fact be regarded as no more exemplary or important than any other person's.

Dumont chose to film a social and geographic milieu he knew well: the daily lives of disaffected working-class teenagers in his hometown of Bailleul, an isolated county seat approximately 25 kilometers northwest of Lille. His protagonist is Freddy, an unemployed high-school dropout who suffers from severe epileptic seizures that have left him feeling ashamed, worthless, and resentful. Coddled by his overindulgent mother, who runs the town café, Freddy is emotionally repressed and incapable of articulating his torment. His only releases consist of frequent copulation with his girlfriend Marie, a cashier at the local supermarket, and moped rides with a quartet of friends who share his silent desperation and aimlessness. When the gang sexually assaults a young majorette in the town's marching band, Marie dumps Freddy and goes out with an Arab teenager named Kader. The gang subsequently attacks Kader on an isolated country road, leaving him dead from Freddy's repeated kicks to the head. At the end of the film, Freddy is arrested on charges of murder, but flees the police station, taking refuge in a field on the outskirts of town.

The Life of Jesus premiered in April 1997 at the Cannes film festival, where it won the Jean Vigo Prize, awarded to recognize "a work characterized by its independent spirit and the quality of its direction," and an honorable mention in the Golden Camera (best film) competition. The distinction was well deserved, for Dumont served as both director and writer, developing his screenplay from the script of an unrealized short film he had written in 1994 titled *Freddy and Marie*.[5] Because shooting and editing consumed most of Dumont's meager budget ($1.2 million), there was only enough money left to print and distribute the film on a limited basis. Nevertheless, it received very positive reviews in France (from *Le Monde, Libération, Cahiers du cinéma,* and *Positif*), and subsequently won awards at major international film festivals.

Dumont chose not to cast professional actors for *The Life of Jesus,* instead seeking out local people whose real lives and personalities resembled those of his characters, then adapting his script to preserve the authentic essence that amateurs brought to the film. To find his models he posted flyers in bars, arcades, and unemployment agencies.[6] After some ten months, Dumont finally settled on two unemployed teenagers: David Douche (Freddy) and Marjorie Cottreel (Marie).

This method echoes that of Bresson, who was notorious for his dogmatic use of non-actors, or "involuntarily expressive models," as he called them, to capture a "pure essence"[7] that professionals reputedly could not provide because of their studied affectation. Like Bresson, Dumont also denied his models access to the screenplay during filming and insisted on systematically shooting each scene dozens of times to strip away their self-consciousness.[8] Dumont defines directing as the process of "creating situations" designed to elicit from non-actors a spontaneous, real-life response in the context of a particular emotional or psychological circumstance. Yet unlike Bresson, who employed a consciously domineering, even sadistic style to strip away his models' outer layers of self-defense and "to invent models as they already are,"[9] Dumont feels uneasy about the exploitative potential of his approach. When asked what the cast members of *The Life of Jesus* took away from the experience, he responded lucidly: "They are proud of the film, very happy to have participated in it, yet at the same time there is something that is beyond them. The film reveals certain things, and I see that they don't always understand them. Cinema contains an incredible degree of manipulation. That doesn't shock me, but I know very well that I am stealing something from them."[10]

The effects of this manipulation are most apparent in the visual style of *The Life of Jesus,* which is radically different from *Hate* and other thematically similar "'hood" films. Whereas Kassovitz employs a rapidly moving, emotionally engaging montage that thrusts spectators into the tumultuous world of teenage delinquency, Dumont offers an uncompromisingly austere, detached portrait of life in Bailleul that draws on Flemish landscape painting and the rural neorealism to which Georges Braque returned at the end of his life after abandoning Cubism.[11] To achieve a comparable stylistic effect on film, Dumont used exclusively CinemaScope lenses during shooting to ensure that "the characters always be set in their milieu"[12] and that he "take up a position at the outermost edge of the

Figs. 2 and 3: Solitary lives—chairlift ride (top) and the majorette alone (bottom)

story, of the scene, and to express [himself] from the margins."[13] However, Dumont's aesthetic is most directly linked to his experience making industrial documentaries. As he told an interviewer: "I only filmed raw material and machines, but I always looked for emotion in the machine and I think that I managed to find it."[14]

In *The Life of Jesus* the results of this eclectic background are striking in their painterly look and expression of emotion through a coldly materialist gaze. Static, extremely long-range views of vast landscapes frame tiny, solitary figures moving from the foreground toward the horizon or vice-versa—a cruelly, starkly beautiful composition that creates a dizzying depth of field to express the metaphysical plight of individuals being swallowed up by an impassive and uncontrollable world. The deep-background, long-range landscape shots in *The Life of Jesus* echo most directly Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest,* which often frames the solitary, emotionally tortured priest against expansive panoramas of the countryside.[15]

Dumont's compositions underscore the loneliness and helplessness of his protagonists. We see Freddy on his moped buzzing through the countryside; Marie and Freddy taking a chairlift ride above a scenic stretch of farmland; Freddy and his gang playing chicken with a car on a one-lane road and parading through the empty streets of Bailleul as part of the town's marching band; finally, perhaps most heartbreakingly, the majorette walking home alone after being sexually assaulted by the gang. [Figures 1, 2, 3]

Dumont's characters are ontologically isolated from each other even when they are in groups—a point he makes by filming their common activities in a series of shot/reverse-shot closeups that shift from individual to individual, thereby denying the existence of shared space, time, and comprehension. In a film whose look is defined by CinemaScope, these closeups function as an emphatic counterpoint to the landscape scenes. To preserve the film's visual discontinuity, medium-range shots framing two or more characters together appear only intermittently in the film, disappearing quickly amidst a string of landscapes and closeups as if to further underscore the superficiality of the characters' social and emotional bonds to each other.

The paradoxical combination of physical proximity and spiritual solitude is the film's structuring motif: Freddy and his mother willfully separate themselves from each other at home so that they do not have to interact; the members of Freddy's gang ride their mopeds together, but barely speak; in the most extreme case, Freddy and Marie copulate repeatedly, but never share true intimacy.

Dumont further underscores the isolation of his protagonists by using a starkly minimalist soundtrack. In contrast to the constant barrage of dialogue and rap music deployed by Kassovitz in *Hate, The Life of Jesus* is a deafeningly quiet film dominated by long, palpable silences that at times make watching it difficult and force spectators to identify with the characters' crushing immobility and emotional repression. The five-minute scene in which Freddy and his pals lounge silently on the steps of the town hall staring into the sun is almost unbearable. The boys have virtually nothing to say to each other; there are only two isolated, awkward remarks about how hot it is and, appropriately enough, how much more time they have to kill until band practice that afternoon.

Dialogue is consistently terse and limited to one-line exchanges, often delivered with unrealistic rapidity and without inflection. In a description of Bresson's models that applies equally well to David Douche (Freddy), Gilles Deleuze writes that "the characters speak as though they were listening to their own words, reported by someone else, to give the voice a literal quality and to sever it from all direct resonance, producing indirect free discourse."[16] The use of a non-actor with limited dialogue provides viewers with neither emotional nor psychological insight into the character, thereby serving Dumont's goal of letting spectators "work through my films on their own."

Just as the film's dialogue exposes the inability of the characters to communicate effectively and connect

with each other emotionally, sound and music are used to signify the dialectical clockwork encompassing Freddy's solitude and inner emotional torment. The steady buzz of his moped pervades the soundtrack, expressing the inexorable quality of his plight, much as the whirring of racetrack ticket machines in Bresson's *Pickpocket* signifies the destiny of the thief Michel and his compulsion to steal. In numerous long-distance landscape scenes, Freddy traverses the frame and disappears from view, yet the noise of his motor lingers as the camera remains immobile.

When the members of the gang ride together, they create a dissonant roar in which individual motors and existences blend together but remain unsynchronized. Though together on their bikes, they cannot speak with or see each other; they each remain essentially isolated. The message is reinforced by the other noises that occasionally break the heavy silence that saturates most of the film: the squeaking of the chairlift carrying Freddy and Marie; their grunting during sex; and the crash of Freddy's moped against the pavement when he returns home after a day of aimless loafing about.

The cumulative effect of Dumont's minimalist use of sound and detached visual style is felt most intensely in three graphic sex scenes between Marie and Freddy. In all three cases, there is no foreplay, dialogue, or background music of any kind, and no post-coital cuddling, just swift, animalistic copulation filmed in a naturalist style. In a green field of tall, windblown grass, Marie and Freddy hold hands as they walk toward a solitary oak tree. This picturesque cliché, presented in a distant profile shot, would conventionally suggest a romantic scene, yet upon reaching the tree the couple disrobes in silence. Cut abruptly to an extreme closeup of Marie's hand guiding Freddy's erection into her vagina, then a few seconds of violent penetration accompanied by Freddy's rhythmic grunting and the slapping of flesh. Finally, a brief medium-range view of the couple sitting together widens into a distant landscape shot of their departure.

Following closely upon a violent epileptic seizure, Freddy's tryst with Marie does little to mitigate his intense shame and resentment at being sick. His social activities provide only fleeting moments of relief, and religious faith gives him no solace at all. While visiting their friend Michou's AIDS-stricken brother in the hospital, a member of Freddy's gang sees a depiction of Lazarus, "the guy who was brought back to life," and naïvely suggests that the patient might still recover, to which Freddy savagely replies, "Shut your trap!" Later in the film, after another seizure and a battery of neurological tests at the hospital, Freddy's mother

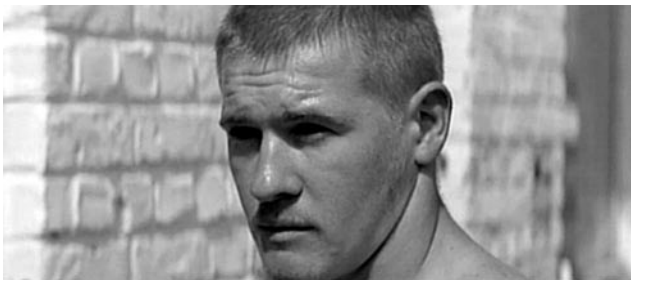


Fig. 4: Freddy—a resentful, degenerate Jesus?

scolds him for not accepting his disease more gracefully, adding that his deceased father watching him from Heaven would be displeased. "Stop it! That's bullshit!" retorts Freddy flatly as he leaves the room.

Despite the parallels between Freddy's life and that of the Biblical Jesus—a heavy cross to bear in the form of his disease, an absent father who presumably watches over him, but gives no guidance, and a loose girlfriend named Marie—the boy obviously has no interest in conforming to the role of humble, patient messiah. Freddy most closely resembles the resentful, degenerate Jesus of Martin Scorsese's controversial film *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1989). [Figure 4] For Dumont, as for Scorsese, these failings are intended to enhance the protagonist's credibility as a symbol for contemporary society and to make his eventual attempt at redemption, which remains hidden until the final scene, even more powerful.

On the whole, however, Dumont's portrait of Freddy owes more to psychoanalysis than to the New Testament. The very image of a narcissistic only child coddled by an overindulgent mother, Freddy battles his spiritual torment using a kind of Freudian repetition automatism that consists of crashing his moped at full speed on the cobblestones each time he returns home. He does so ritualistically, instinctively, examining his self-inflicted wounds with a vague satisfaction that betrays an unconscious desire to punish himself for being sick and to expunge his attendant sense of self-loathing and abnormality from other teenagers.

Yet the scars that cover Freddy's torso function as a physical signifier of his torment and reveal that his crash landings have been ineffective in alleviating his psychological suffering. More importantly, this incessant self-mutilation can be read as an expression of what Freud calls Thanatos: the unconscious attraction toward death experienced by those who have suffered cataclysmic trauma. In this sense, the crash scenes (and those where Freddy kicks a wall in frustration) express the futility of his existence, which he is otherwise unable to articulate. Dumont gives this

futility a palpable quality by depicting Freddy's life as a vicious, self-perpetuating circle of collapsing into epileptic convulsions, undergoing humiliating neurological tests at the hospital, and wrecking his moped.

The cycle recurs three times in the film, during winter, spring, and summer, intensifying each time in a downward spiral that is interrupted only by increasingly infrequent copulation with Marie and joyrides with his gang. These distractions provide Freddy less and less comfort, for even though his friends share his Thanatos, theirs is less intense, as Freddy's violent seizure just after a game of chicken makes clear. He is thus denied the obvious pleasure and social bonding that his pals derive from the game. Though Freddy's wretched existence may at first elicit pity, our compassion dissipates rapidly during the last third of the film, where Freddy's worsening epilepsy signifies his descent into cruelty, violence, and moral depravity.

By the end of the film Freddy has become a thoroughly reprehensible, seemingly unredeemable character. He shows no signs of remorse at all, either at home, where he lies on his bed staring impassively at the ceiling with his hands behind his head, or at the police station after his arrest, where he stares sullenly at the floor. Like the viewer, the detective who questions Freddy struggles to understand the boy's emotionless silence. "Where do you get the idea to bust up a young guy like that," the detective assigned to the case comments tersely. "You don't like Arabs, you're a racist? Only, are you responsible?"

The transparent invitation to displace blame for the crime from Freddy onto familial, medical, social, or psychological factors beyond his control—a classic counter-discourse of victimization that has encountered strong backlash recently in both French and American culture—rings particularly hollow in this context, for we have just witnessed the boy kick Kader to death. The frustration and outrage felt by the spectator redoubles when Freddy flees the unlocked, unguarded interrogation room as the policeman gazes wistfully out the window.

We see him returning home to retrieve his moped, which then suddenly appears abandoned by the side of a country road. To the left, in the background, a rear view of Freddy's body face down in a ditch overgrown with tall grass. Is he dead? Has he committed suicide by intentionally crashing his bike yet again? No, for as the camera pans around we see that he is kneeling, motionless. [Figure 5] He starts to blink his eyes rapidly and tremble. Signs of an imminent seizure or an emotional release? Freddy whips his body backward against the ground several times before finally

Figs. 5 and 6: Freddy first kneels, motionless (top); then lies staring at the sky (bottom)

remaining on his back, bathed in blinding sunlight and staring toward the sky. [Figure 6] A cloud blocks the sun and a shadow falls over him. The camera zooms in on an ant crawling over a leaf onto his body, accompanied by the rising sound of sobs, then shifts to his grimy, cracked thumb. Tears well up in Freddy's eyes and roll down his face. [Figures 7, 8, 9] The closeup of his head cuts to a final long-distance shot of the surrounding countryside. A moment passes, and the screen fades to black.

It is an elliptical, ambiguous, and in many ways unsatisfying ending, one that runs counter to everything we have come to know and feel about the boy. At first viewing, it seems unbelievable, inconsistent, and even morally inappropriate that he should suddenly comprehend the gravity of his crime and show remorse. Given the pietà-like visual qualities of the final sequence—the inscription of Freddy's remorse and compassion on his body as quasi-epileptic trembling, the metaphorical play of light and shadow, and the juxtaposition of sublime images belonging to Nature (the ant on the leaf) with the grotesque aspect of Man (Freddy's thumb)—this challenge could be read as a plea in favor of Catholic morality and salvation through repentance. Yet Dumont eschews theology in favor of deistic humanism. As he writes in his production notebook:

> In the final scene, I want to hand Freddy over to the audience, so that they can come to terms with both the good and the evil in him. Because it is impossible to separate the two, the ending offers no predetermined moral. It's

Figs. 7, 8, and 9: Ant, leaf, skin (top); thumb (center); tears (bottom)

> almost unbearable that there is none. I think that's for spectators to work out, part of their isolation. The audience is the film's moral, its conscience. Freddy's story sublimates the evil that exists in each of us.[17]

Indeed, the film's final pair of shots suggests that Freddy's potential redemption will consist not of religious conversion or spiritual ascension, but rather reintegration into earthly humanity. The closeup of his tearful face underscores his isolation, physical and metaphysical, in the overgrown ditch where he lies. The ensuing long-range landscape shot foregrounds the ditch against a farm in the distance, where we can just discern a farmhouse nestled between two freshly plowed fields. Drawing on the tradition of realist painting, in particular Braque's *Landscape with a Plow* (Dumont's original inspiration for the scene),[18] the image is a quintessentially French signifier of civilization surrounded by wild, untamed Nature. Yet it is unclear whether Freddy will be able to reintegrate himself into society or whether he will remain isolated on its fringe. The farmhouse and fields are far away and slightly out of focus, suggesting just how far he has to go. Left unresolved, Freddy's eventual success or failure is ultimately beside the point, as is the theological question of salvation or redemption.

When questioned about the meaning of the final scene, Dumont defines it in terms of self-awareness and compassion:

> Freddy is a bastard, but he realizes what he has done. He sees the seriousness of his actions and the depth of his own misfortune. By sensing his misery, he simultaneously elevates himself. This epiphany, this elevation is what I take from Christianity. Compassion is a natural feeling that brings us all together. That moment expresses my love for humanity.[19]

Seen in this light, the final closeup of Freddy can be understood not only as a pietà because of way his compassion is registered on his body, but also as a Jansenist ex-voto painting in the way that divine grace is only hinted at obliquely, rather than being explicitly signified through classic iconography such as angels, halos, or the cross. The possibility of grace is suggested by sunlight that illuminates Freddy as the sun moves between clouds, recalling the ray of light used by Philippe de Champaigne in *The Ex-Voto of 1662* to signify his daughter's miraculous cure from a long-term sickness. Significantly, in both cases grace is limited to a brief moment in time; lasting salvation remains hidden within each individual and ultimately unknowable.

Yet in a Jansenist perspective this lack of proof is all the more reason to have faith. Freddy's compassion for Kader, wretched and embryonic though it may be, is just enough to reveal his potential for good and to justify hope, however minimal, in the essential goodness of humanity as a whole. More importantly, Dumont's mise-en-scène invites spectators to extend the same compassion to Freddy, thereby presenting us with an uncomfortable invitation: to pardon an unpardonable act of evil and to offer undeserved grace in place of justifiable condemnation. In essence, we suddenly find ourselves in the unexpected, singularly troubling role of God asked to pass judgment. Our accumulated disgust for Freddy, carefully prepared throughout the film, predisposes us against forgiveness, yet the final scene implores us to grant it.

By thrusting his audience into this uncomfortable situation, Dumont incorporates another defining trope of Bresson's work, which Paul Schrader has called the moment of "decisive action" that "forces the viewer into confrontation with the Wholly Other he would normally avoid" and "requests his participation and

approval."[20] As an illustration Schrader cites the final sequence of *Pickpocket*, in which the previously impassive thief Michel, now in prison, kisses his on-again, off-again girlfriend through the bars and exclaims regretfully, "Oh Jeanne, what a strange path I had to take to reach you!" As Schrader notes, the viewer is faced with a choice:

> He can reject his instinctive feelings and refuse to take the film seriously, or he can accommodate his thinking to his feelings. If he chooses the latter, he will, having been given no emotional constructs by the director, have constructed his own 'screen.' He creates a translucent, mental screen through which he can cope with both his feelings and the film.[21]

The choice is the same in *The Life of Jesus*. If we refuse to pardon Freddy by interpreting his tears as contemptible self-pity rather than compassion, we forfeit the superior subject position of divine judge and revert to the state of anti-humanist, existential isolation that Freddy himself occupied before his acquisition of self-awareness. Condemning Freddy means condemning ourselves and implicitly repudiating our faith in humanity. By judging him, we are judging ourselves, like it or not. Beyond this realization, the film provides no resolution, instead forcing the audience to supply closure by interrogating its own sense of ethics.

To understand fully how Dumont conscripts the spectator's subjectivity into the film as a signifier in its own right, we must turn to the notion of suture.[22] In psychoanalytical terms, suture is based on the premise that the act of viewing a film normally places the spectator in the Imaginary subject position of parent-child nondifferentiation and replicates a pre-mirror phase feeling of plenitude in which the viewer's identity is utterly secure, unaffected, and unchallenged by the world of the film. When suture occurs, it displaces the spectator/child to a state of individual isolation and self-definition in contradistinction to the film/parent, which in a Lacanian framework now corresponds to the Symbolic position. By exposing the illusion of detachment and denying spectators the complacent pleasure that accompanies such a perspective, suture forces the audience to confront its inherent complicity in the camera's voyeurism and its construction of meaning.

In *The Life of Jesus*, suture depends on frustrating spectators' expectations and viewing habits. Sometimes Dumont forces spectators to see things they do not want to see, as in the graphic, emotionless, almost bestial sex scenes. Far from being gratuitous pornography, the raw closeups of Freddy penetrating Marie

Figs 10, 11, and 12: The attack on Kader

force the audience to define and invest its own subjectivity in the film. These scenes, which disrupt the comfortable cinematic conventions of stylized eroticism, deny viewers the pleasure of being passive voyeurs and challenge them to think about the destructive, violent dimensions of sex.

Similarly, Dumont films Freddy's attack on Kader with a metonymic technique that denies viewers the spectacle of violence that they would expect, and perhaps even unconsciously want to see. Our medium-range view of the gang running Kader's moped off the road and dragging him from the ditch cuts to a closer shot of the young Arab lying on the ground at Freddy's feet, yet just before Freddy delivers the first kick, we jump to an extreme closeup of his face contorted in anger and hatred. We hear the sound of Freddy's shoe smashing repeatedly against Kader's skull, yet the camera holds steady for several long seconds before shifting to a split-second closeup of Kader's bloody, now unconscious head just as it recoils from a final, fatal blow. [Figures 10, 11, 12]

Stylistically the scene echoes strongly the murder sequences in Bresson's *L'Argent* (*Money*, 1983), where

we see only an axe being raised high in the air and crimson blood being washed from a pair of hands over a white sink. In both films the visual metonymy cloaks graphic violence, yet in so doing, paradoxically renders it unsettling and uncanny (in the Freudian sense of *unheimlich*)—an effect made possible by the very banality of, and contemporary audiences' desensitization to, cinematic ultra-violence. The effect is to divorce the violent act from its perpetrator and to shift emphasis to the social and psychological causes of violence. For Bresson's murderer, Yvon Targe, it was being falsely imprisoned and losing his job and family; for Freddy, it was epilepsy, aimlessness, and self-loathing. Viewers instinctively resist this implicit exculpation, which Dumont's policeman makes explicit when he wonders aloud whether Freddy can be held responsible for the murder.

Yet at the end of both *The Life of Jesus* and *Money,* the murderous, seemingly unredeemable protagonists commit sudden, implausible acts of conscience: Yvon turns himself in and confesses; Freddy discovers compassion and experiences remorse for the first time. When subjected to this bait-and-switch tactic, viewers are hard put to remain indifferent. The penultimate shot of The *Life of Jesus,* a closeup of Freddy's tearful face looking directly into the camera for the first time, sutures viewers definitively into the film and compels them to define the ethics of their own gaze vis-à-vis Freddy's. In Brechtian fashion, the film's conflict here extends beyond the edge of the screen and inextricably conflates reality with spectacle and life with art.

Shortly after the release of *The Life of Jesus*, Dumont began working on a second feature film, *Humanity,* which tells the story of a police lieutenant assigned to investigate the brutal rape and murder of an eleven-year-old girl. *Humanity* galvanizes the stylistic elements that link Dumont to Bresson: the static, detached look and narrative; the visual and aural minimalism; the first-time, nonprofessional actors (who captured the festival's awards for best male and female lead); and the use of raw, naturalistic materialism to interrogate the essence of human nature and to suture the audience's subjectivity into the film's ethical conflict and resolution. Also made on location in Bailleul, the two-and-a-half-hour film premiered at Cannes in 1999, winning the jury's prestigious Grand Prize amidst a swell of controversy. Festival screenings elicited loud cheers and even louder whistles from audiences, with critical reaction also bitterly divided between those who hailed *Humanity* as a daring deconstruction of the police thriller genre and those who dismissed it as a willfully dull, pretentious exercise in hermeticism. "I feel rather like an anarchist," Dumont commented shortly after the festival. "I don't subscribe to any doctrine; instead I am trying to rethink ideologies and the substance of humanity in all its possibilities. I film horror just as I film pleasure. What's important is what one makes of such things, how people use them to invent themselves. . . . I make films as a person searching for something."[23]

Recently, Dumont's quest brought him to the California desert surrounding Joshua Tree National Park, where he finished shooting his latest project in December 2002. Titled *Twenty-nine Palms,* after the oasis town where much of the action takes place, the film recounts the suffocating, intensely carnal relationship between an American photographer (first-time actor David Wissak) and his Russian girlfriend (Yekaterina Golubeva, known for her role in Leos Carax's *Pola X*). The film pushes Dumont's neo-Bressonian aesthetic to the extreme, reducing dialogue, plot, and character development to the absolute minimum in favor of beautifully photographed scenes of hyper-violence and pleasure that melt together in a primordial amalgam.[24]

Twenty-nine Palms premiered in August 2003 at the Venice International Film Festival, one of three French entries on the program. Though it did not capture any awards, it sparked the kind of passionate, highly polarized reaction that has become Dumont's trademark. Many spectators in Venice, as well as at subsequent festivals in Toronto and London, walked out of screenings in protest. Yet Dumont, who describes his latest work as "an experimental horror film meant to assault viewers' sensibilities and the conventions of commercial American cinema,"[25] remains unperturbed, taking the controversy as a sign that he has achieved that goal. Whatever one thinks of Dumont's work, his commitment to independent, provocative filmmaking and his stature in France's newest wave of young directors are undeniable. The American premiere of *Twenty-nine Plams* is scheduled for March 26 in New York and Los Angeles, with other cities to follow.

Brett Bowles is Assistant Professor of French at Iowa State University. He recently completed a cultural history of Marcel Pagnol's rural films from the 1930s, and is developing a second book on newsreels, politics, and public opinion in France during the Second World War.

Notes

1. Dumont, a self-professed "filmmaker who does not like cinema," identifies Bresson as one of the few directors whom he admires, along with Pasolini, Renais, and Kubrick. In late 1997 Dumont wrote Bresson a poetic, heartfelt letter that ended with the words: "You are a lumi-

nary. I love you dearly." My thanks to James Quandt, senior programmer at the Cinémathèque Ontario, for providing this reference.

2. Quoted in Isabelle Danel, "C'est au spectateur de devenir humain," *Télérama* no. 2473 (4 June 1997): 23.
3. Quoted in Philippe Royer, "Les Flandres servent de cadre à une *Vie de Jésus* assez particulière," *La Croix* (4 June 1997), 3.
4. Quoted in Royer, 3.
5. The original screenplay Dumont used during shooting has not been published. However, after making the film he reworked and published it in novella format: Bruno Dumont, *La Vie de Jésus* (Paris: Dis-Voir, 2001).
6. Interview with Mike Jeck on the DVD version of *Humanity*.
7. Bresson, *Notes sur le cinématographe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 89. This and all subsequent translations are my own.
8. Marjorie Marlein and Bertrand Morizur, "Entretien avec Bruno Dumont," www.00h00.com.
9. Bresson, 35. On Bresson's sadism, see Keith Reader, *Robert Bresson* (London: Manchester University Press, 2000), 5, and François Truffaut, *The Films in My Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 192.
10. Quoted in Lavoie, 22.
11. Bruno Dumont, "Notes de travail sur *La Vie de Jésus*," *Positif* no. 440 (October 1997): 58-59.
12. Quoted in Jean-Michel Frodon, "Il faut donner au spectateur la possibilité de penser par lui-même: Entretien avec Bruno Dumont," *Le Monde* (5 June 1997), 32.
13. Quoted in Anne Boulay, "'Le pire pour moi, ce serait l'indifférence': Entretien avec Bruno Dumont," *Libération* (9 May 1999), 3.
14. Interview with Mike Jeck.
15. Paul Schrader, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972), 67.
16. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L'image-temps* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1985), 315.
17. Dumont, "Notes de travail," 59.
18. Ibid.
19. From a press release distributed by French Cultural Services. Text available at www.france.diplomatie.fr/culture/france/cinema/fictions/100 films/fr/086.html.
20. Schrader, 81.
21. Ibid.
22. Jean-Pierre Oudart, "La Suture," *Cahiers du cinéma* 211-212 (April/May 1969). Reprinted as "Cinema and Suture," in *Cahiers du cinéma 1969-1972: The Politics of Representation,* ed. Nick Browne (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 45-57.
23. Quoted in Marlein and Morizur, www.00h00.com.
24. For more information see http://www.29palms-lefilm.com and http://tadrart.com/fr/films/29palms.
25. Sébastien Ors, "*Twenty-nine Palms*: Entretien avec Bruno Dumont," 11 March 2003, http://tadrart.com/29palms/FR/Interview_Dumont.doc

Abstract Though virtually unknown in America, Bruno Dumont is among France's most provocative young directors. Using his award-winning first feature as a case study, this essay analyzes Dumont's deconstruction of commercial cinema, denial of the complacent pleasure it offers spectators, and transformation of the viewing experience into an ethical challenge.

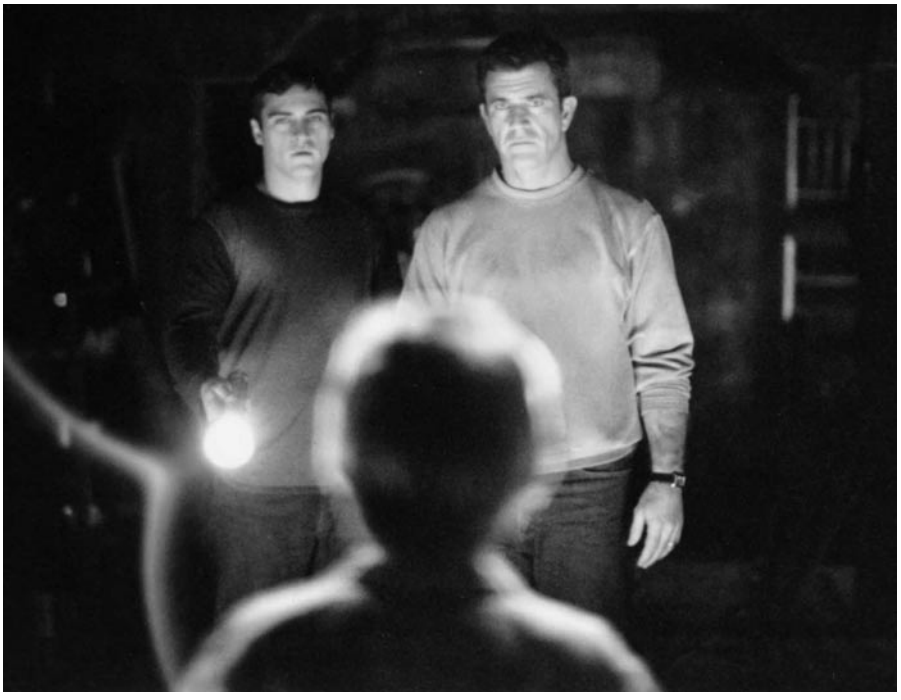
Signs

Director/writer: M. Night Shyamalan. Producers: Kathleen Kennedy, Frank Marshall, Sam Mercer, Shyamalan. Cinematographer: Tak Fujimoto. Buena Vista Pictures.

The plot of *Signs* (2002) seems relatively straightforward: aliens on an abortive invasion of Earth raid an isolated family farm while, apparently coincidentally, its owner, ex-minister Graham Hess, resolves the spiritual and emotional crisis triggered by his wife's death in a road accident. But the film is not a simple science fiction thriller because of the way it insistently conflates two realities, the manifest reality of aliens and the latent one of the accident. It is the latter which lies behind Graham's distance from his family and his decision to resign from the ministry. This conflation not only drives the narrative, but also extends to the level of basic perception, as Graham's repeated flashbacks to the accident are so relentlessly juxtaposed with the alien presence that they threaten to confound his, and our, view of it. The implausibility of much of the film's events, the curious passivity of its human characters, and the elusiveness of its aliens may be explained as distortions appearing to, if not produced by, Graham's confused perspective.

These distortions are abruptly resolved when an alien intruder is eliminated from the Hess home in a way that comes to Graham as a kind of revelation. Confused impressions of the present and the memory of his wife's last words synthesize at last in a new perspective that reveals both how he is to understand her death and how he can defeat the alien. This perspective is represented in visual terms as Graham observes his family with an almost disembodied, all-encompassing gaze that approximates God's view. The meaning it reveals restores Graham's religious faith as it reduces the seemingly unrelated experiences of his wife's death and of the alien invasion to a consistent series of signs, a message which he assumes is from God.

Although Graham comes to understand the aliens in terms of his familial and religious crisis, they do not



(Top) Looking at the signs: the Hess family—father Graham (Mel Gibson), his brother Merrill (Joaquin Phoenix), and children Morgan (Rory Culkin) and Bo (Abigail Breslin); (left) defending the family—Merrill and Graham look for Morgan

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function in the narrative symbolically, as signs of that crisis. However, they are made to appear as a kind of materialization or embodiment of it. Their eruption into sight coincides with the suspension of a system of signification (Graham's faith), and their disappearance from view coincides with its restoration.

If the parallel plots of Graham's struggle to understand his wife's death in the context of his faith—to see it, in effect, from God's perspective—and the alien invasion are both resolved as Graham's view on his family comes to approximate God's view, they may be related in terms of a struggle to reach and hold this view. The aliens are only the ostensible object of this struggle. They appear from alternate, and not entirely consistent, perspectives driven by the compulsion of remembered trauma, the schematic interpretations of the media, and, finally, the indiscriminate systematizing of religious faith, so that *Signs* can be viewed as a kind of battle to clarify and control the camera's point of view. The battle seems resolved when Graham's perspective appears to fuse with God's, but the effect of this resolution is to render irrelevant the actual nature of the aliens, and to obscure the values and needs that drive perception of them. Despite the film's apparently successful drive toward closure, the borders between faith, reality, and delusion, and self and alien, remain porous and only provisionally defined.

Ultimately, we cannot be certain if *Signs* is the story of a religious man who resists a fall into psychosis following trauma, the triumph of a troubled religious warrior over an implacable other, or the delusion of a bewildered man trying to convince himself he is such a warrior.

Framing the Present by the Past As a Moral Lesson

Signs is not a radical departure from M. Night Shyamalan's previous films, which place their characters in a predicament that forces them to accept some truth about a past trauma, thereby gaining access to a supernatural insight or power through which they master their present situation. All his films have a similar structure, though their juxtaposition of past and present is at its most violent and disorienting in *Signs*. To varying degrees, they shift back and forth in time as the past trauma appears in the form of a flashback or dream that can be made consistent with the present once that present is recognized as being some kind of revisiting or working through of the past. Although the trauma is usually not repressed, the logic of the process is almost psychoanalytic except for one fundamental difference: the truth revealed proves to be of supernatural origin, with spiritual implications that demand action, so that the ultimate effect is moral and not psychological. This is particularly the case in *Signs,* where the events juxtaposed appear so radically different that they cannot be understood through an internal reconstruction of Graham's point of view, that is, through some reworking of his own identity.

Wide Awake (1998), Shyamalan's first film, most closely resembles *Signs* in terms of its theme and structure, which play out unconvincingly within the constraints of a coming-of-age comedy. Joshua Beal, a young schoolboy, seeks to communicate with God in his effort to understand the death of his grandfather, who is repeatedly recalled in dream and flashback until the near-death of Joshua's best friend during an epileptic seizure forces Joshua to accept that his grandfather is gone. He can then understand everyday aspects of his world, such as girls and bullies, and is finally visited by an angel, who reassures him that grandfather is fine. In *The Sixth Sense* (1999), child psychiatrist Dr. Malcolm Crowe comes, in the course of helping another troubled child, to accept that he was actually killed by a former patient and is dead. The relation between the past trauma and the present here approaches disjunction, as the truth of the past implies that the point of view through which the present unfolds does not exist in the reality that is perceived from it. In *Unbreakable* (2000), David Dunn miraculously escapes injury in a rail crash and, remembering another accident which brought to an end his college football career, realizes that he was not, and never has been, injured, or even sick. He accepts his superhuman invulnerability, and with that, his implicit obligation to use his powers superheroically. Like *Unbreakable* and *The Sixth Sense, Signs* relies on a genre form in which the supernatural is accepted by audiences, but it also marks a return by Shyamalan to considering the supernatural in the explicitly religious context of *Wide Awake*.

In contrast to *Unbreakable,* where the accident flashback is voluntarily evoked only once and then consciously worked through, flashbacks continually intrude on the present in *Signs,* operating as a kind of frame that subliminally distorts, and threatens to overwhelm, perception of the aliens. There are strong structural similarities between the accident flashbacks and scenes in which Graham watches the invasion unfold on television, and their initial effect is to relate the aliens and the accident to each other as the confused objects of a gaze struggling to distinguish the shape of the present from the shadow of the past. The first flashback comes directly on a shot of Graham and his

Watching television—signs are appearing all over the world

young children Morgan and Bo and brother Merrill watching a television report of the aliens. Like all those that will follow, the flashback begins with a sequence of Graham driving toward the scene of the accident. In this recurring sequence, we share Graham's gaze as he drives up, then we see him behind the wheel, from the perspective of the accident scene. These images in turn have a formal resemblance to shots of Graham standing alone before the television watching the aliens' progress with the same disbelieving, apprehensive gaze.

One possible explanation for Graham's confusion of aliens and accident, and his initial passivity toward both, is that he is actually dreaming. The images of his wife's death which insistently break into the alien invasion narrative are most naturally treated as flashbacks, but they may be a repressed memory that is pressuring its incomplete transformation into a dream of alien invasion. *Signs* opens with Graham waking abruptly, and we see him wake with similar suddenness throughout the film to find himself caught up in a drama that often appears surreal. Graham has woken to the cries of his children and rushes out to find them deep in the cornfield. Bo's first words, "Are you in my dream too?," and his incomplete correction, "This is not a drea . . ." might suggest identifying the film's convolutions as those of a dream, particularly as Bo claims to have dreamed or foreseen various events in the film. *Wide Awake* also begins with its central character waking—from a dream whose content continues to unfold in flashbacks. However, as in *Signs,* disturbances of perception do not seem intended to suggest the unreality of events, because they cease only once the characters begin to treat their predicament as a reality in which they must act.

In the case of Joshua Beal in *Wide Awake,* and, to a lesser extent, Dr. Crowe in *The Sixth Sense,* character development occurs through, and allows the resolution of, the juxtaposition of past and present which structures the film. The truth that can explain this juxtaposition is internalized by the character as a moral which, in the same movement, leads him to initiate actions that bring the narrative to a conclusion. In *Signs,* there is instead of an internalization an *externalization,* with the aliens coming to embody a tension that might have been considered internal to Graham, and which appears resolved through their elimination.

Framing of the Aliens by the Media

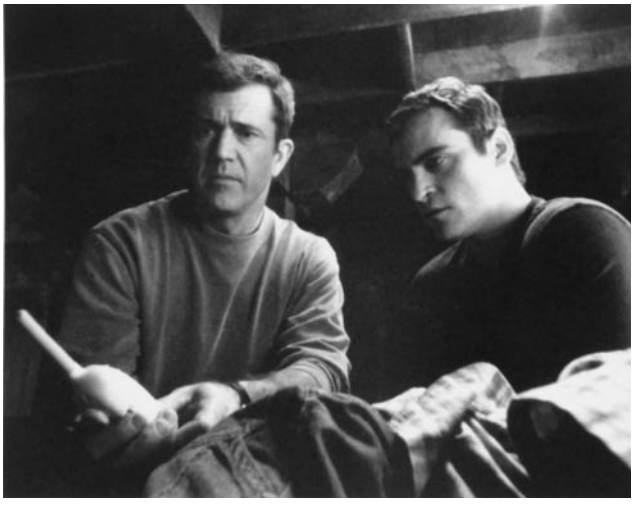
The passive gaze with which Graham views both the aliens and the accident appears in scenes clearly unrelated to either, while the film includes a host of shots of other characters looking on with similar muteness. The primary effect of these shots, with their artificial composition compounded by the actor's odd looks, is humorous, so that what might have been an accumulating sense of strangeness is attributed not to a distortion of perception but to the narrative content involving aliens. Moreover, the fact that other characters share Graham's passive gaze suggests its complications should not be reduced to his crisis of faith alone, particularly as its most consistent object is not personal but communal: the television presentation of the aliens.

Like Graham, everyone views the signs of alien presence with a disbelieving credulity, acting as if they were caught in a nightmare they cannot quite believe, yet cannot avoid. Such a perspective must render whatever it frames at least a little surreal, with reality subordinate to the obsessive gaze on it. This perspective develops through the family's passive response to the continuous media coverage of mysterious crop signs and alien encounters in the outside world. First, Bo announces that "the same show is on every station," and the family accepts that the ability to move between different channels, different views, is lost. Graham, afraid they will become obsessed, initially forbids them to watch, but this only increases their anxiety and makes the television appear a means of understanding because it might present that anxiety with an object. Once he relents and allows them to watch, they see potentially unrelated incidents subsumed into a media narrative that progressively excludes all else until it climaxes in the capture of an alien on film. Amateur

footage taken at a children's party, it is the sort of utterly unconvincing "evidence" of aliens with which we are all familiar, yet the family, and apparently also the watching world, is convinced. Finally, expectations appear confirmed by images of an invasion that Merrill can describe as "just like *War of the Worlds*." The obsessive anxiety that has been aroused ensures a hysterical reaction to the aliens, whose actions are not necessarily as hostile as is assumed.

Even events that the family experiences directly are interpreted according to media suggestion. Morgan decides the sounds coming from his old baby monitor are aliens speaking in code, and what would normally be dismissed as childish make-believe acquires credibility because of the television reports. Persistent attempts to identify the sounds end with the monitor being held up to the sky like an offering in search of a sign. As if in answer, the noise resolves into a kind of chirping. We accept the characters' conclusion these are alien voices, but all we actually hear is chirping. It is as if a determination to find meaning in the sounds presumes the eventual conclusion that they have meaning, with the one nearest to hand—inevitably, the one eagerly offered by the media—being seized on.

The determination on meaning is consistently Morgan's, and consistently resisted by his father. Morgan's insight into the aliens proves uncannily accurate, and consonant with the television pronouncements. When the first spaceships appear, he solemnly insists, "The history of the world's future is on television now." His "Everything people have written about in science books is going to change" is immediately parroted word-for-word by the news commentator. The identification of Morgan with the view from the external world as represented by the media ties the family dynamics into the larger narrative of the alien invasion, in which they are not directly involved until the film's climax. By that point, Morgan will be explicitly isolated from Graham but, rather than being identified more strongly with the view from the external world, he will have become its object. And by then, the view from outside will no longer be the familiar one of the television, but that of the aliens.



Decoding the aliens on the baby monitor

First Contact: An Encounter with Alien and Self

The first encounter with an alien occurs at the home of Ray Reddy, the local vet who hit and killed Colleen, Graham's wife, after falling asleep at the wheel of his van. This setting is not coincidental, but part of the incessant juxtaposition of the aliens with Colleen's death. It is introduced framed by the memory of this event, as we see Graham receive a phone call in a room piled with the stored possessions of his wife. In effect, Graham appears from the perspective of her death, looking into it as he concludes that the unidentified caller was Reddy and decides to confront him. If we consider what follows from the same perspective, it might suggest that Graham's reaction to the alien is shaped by the encounter with Reddy, whom he approaches with a wariness that approaches dread. Graham may be displacing onto the alien the hostility aroused by Reddy's presence and the memory of Colleen's death which Reddy evokes.

Graham finds the alien trapped on the other side of Reddy's pantry door and, after what seems to be an abortive attempt to communicate, he reaches for a knife. Initially, it is used not to attack but to see the alien, as Graham slides it under the door hoping to catch the alien's reflection in the blade. When the alien extends a hand under the door, its intent uncertain, Graham uses the knife to slice off some fingers. He later says he had a "distinct feeling" the alien wanted to harm him. Later events appear to validate that judgement, but this first encounter suggests that fear might well be the determining factor. The only alien we actually see intent on harm is conspicuously lacking a few fingers—it's presumably the one attacked by Graham and now intent on revenge, or simply responding in kind. This raises the possibility that the apparent alien invasion may actually be a series of personalized contacts ending in violence because of human fear.

Attacking the alien

We see Graham separated from the unknown by a door, in a relation between self and other which might bring them face to face, or end with self reasserted over an other who is not even seen. Contact is mediated by the knife, which is both weapon and mirror. The attempt to see in reflection is appropriate: Graham stands before an opening which he treats as a barrier, making it serve in an encounter whose conclusion, driven by his own fear, must be a function of how he sees himself. (Graham catches his own reflection in the blade, not the alien's, so that though he tells his family he "saw one at Ray's house," all he actually sees is himself.) Yet the encounter has a real object, which Graham will not see, so that the challenge to self posed by the unseen presence implies a reworking of the division between real and unreal.

An apparently gratuitous detail, that Ray Reddy is played by *Signs*' Indian-born director, further develops these themes. Everyone else in the film is white—except for the aliens, which makes Reddy a little like them. Graham sees Ray as he will come to see the aliens, as bearers of signs from a God whose intentions toward him have become ambiguous. But that Reddy is played by the director, in effect the "God" of the film and orchestrator of its signs, is consistent with Graham's world being ordered not simply in terms of same/other, but with that other being seen as an agent of the "big Other," of whatever is imagined to stand behind the world itself. Graham's intimation of that Other's potential hostility (manifest in his wife's accident, for which Reddy appears as both cause and sign) is perceived as the hostility of the other, and seems to justify Graham's own in response.

The Alien Assault: A Reassertion of the Sameness of Family

Graham's impulse is to flee after his encounter with the alien (and Ray), but he is forced to stay by Morgan's refusal to leave the farm "where we lived with Mom." The tension between them quickly becomes overt, with Morgan yelling at Graham, "I hate you. You let Mom die." Given Morgan's special insight into the aliens, it is no surprise that when they penetrate the family space, he is the only family member affected, suffering a potentially fatal asthma attack. As Graham struggles to bring it under control, he holds his son close and insists, "Breathe with me. Together . . . together." Yet Morgan's breathing grows more straitened and Graham curses, "Don't do this to me again . . . not again. I hate you." (In this scene, Graham variously, and indistinguishably, addresses God and his son.) As Morgan subordinates his breathing to his father's, the attack subsides and Graham can assert their identity: "We're the same. We're the same." Thus the tear in Graham's world caused by his wife's death, having found expression in the division between him and his son before the presence of a hostile other, appears to be followed by a situation in which Morgan's sacrifice to that other is averted by identification with his father.

The next morning, as if a consequence of Morgan's reunion with Graham, the aliens appear to have departed, with the resumption of normality signaled by the hollow echo of the television from upstairs. It is moved to where Morgan lies and, even though switched off, promptly provides a revelation: one alien has remained behind, reflected in its blank screen, and now stands menacingly over the boy. This is another instance of mediated perception of the aliens, but one that relates it to another theme, of the alien being seen in reflection, and so locates the media as one of the means through which the alien appears in a mirroring relation to self, with the potential for the alien to be revealed or for self to be reasserted.

The sight of the alien holding Morgan's life in its hands evokes the memory of Colleen's last words, which were addressed to Graham as if he were not present: "Tell Graham, 'See.' . . . Tell him to see. . . . And tell Merrill to swing away." Graham at last makes sense of this as a message revealing how he can save his son now. He "sees" his brother's old baseball bat hanging on the wall and tells Merrill to "swing away" at the alien. In finding this meaning in his wife's words, Graham also finds meaning in her death: she died so the words might be burned into his memory, so that they can come back to him now.

It is through Graham's capacity to "see" in a particular way that the men of the family restore Morgan and master the alien in their home. Graham sees the disparate elements of the scene before him in the context of the memories they evoke, and he synthesizes them into a battle plan. Logically prior to Graham's ability to see the signs is his determination to see *as* signs. This is a function of his religious belief, which makes the world a series of signs from God, and its effect is to furnish him with a weapon against the alien. Graham's thinking is represented visually by his strange perspective on the scene, a near-disembodied gaze that allows him to survey everything in the room, except himself—and, by implication, the confused desire and fractured preconceptions behind his point of view. This gaze approaches the God's eye view, an all-encompassing gaze through which everything is seen and understood from a universal perspective which abstracts out all particularities of interest and identity.

The God's eye view is the end point of the supernormal enhancements of perspective through which characters in Shyamalan's other films render coherent the memory of past trauma and the demands of the present. As in *Signs,* the effect is to free up perception of the present and unlock the character's potential to act. The understanding afforded by the new perspective usually has a visual representation. A rapid-fire revisiting of earlier scenes concludes *The Sixth Sense,* but their message is now clarified as Crowe understands that he was not perceived by others because he is dead. In a similar burst of images at the end of *Unbreakable,* Dunn perceives the truth not simply of his own life, but that of another, Elijah Price, as a terrorist.

The Struggle for Possession of the God's Eye View

While Graham strives to see *as* God, *Signs* initially aligns the aliens *with* God so that they appear to the family as signs from, and of, Him. The connection is made directly by Graham when the first spaceships appear. What he talks of as a potential sign that "someone up there is watching," as evidence of God, is more obviously evidence of another "someone up there": the aliens. Graham's logic implies that if he cannot conceive his experience in relation to an ordering, good God, he will fear it as the effect of an incomprehensible force appearing in place of, and effectively as, God. If Graham sees the aliens as representing God, from whom he both expects and dreads a sign to reorient himself in the new (and alien) world of his wife's death, he is himself somewhat like them, using signs to navigate in a hostile world. Ultimately, his drive toward the God's eye view will implicate him in an impossible attempt to see as if he were the God who has become Other to him by, in effect, identifying himself with the aliens. The restoration of his faith requires some position from which he can see the gaze of God upon him. This needs the interposition of a third

The god's eye view—implicitly alien

element that can be treated as the embodiment of the gaze of God, which Graham can then himself see and master. The way the aliens are presented in *Signs* makes them function as this element for Graham.

The stages through which this occurs can best be traced visually. The film begins with the aliens in possession of the God's eye view, as we see the discovery of the crop signs in Graham's cornfield give way to a retreating aerial view on the scene, implicitly the aliens' gaze. This is followed by shots of human characters set against the sky in the sort of framing familiar from Westerns. *Signs* does bear some similarity to a Western in which exposed, isolated settler families are menaced by an alien Other, but in place of their exposure to a gaping sky and empty plain we see a lapsed minister and a female police officer crouched low under a cloudy sky to examine some corn. They might be taken as representatives of religious faith and rational investigation, two modes of human perception which have the God's eye view as their ideal. They appear turned back toward the earth, exposed to the sky—and to the gaze from the outside which, once identified with the aliens, is perceived by the humans as a known yet unseen gaze on them which they must eliminate.

Meanwhile, the film presents its characters working to take hold of a series of variations in perspective. This begins with the opening shot, an unidentified, blurry gaze through a window on an empty swing in the backyard of the Hess family home, and continues as that gaze recurs amid an array of shots of characters looking through or out of windows, and of them watching television, aliens, or their own memories. In the repeated introduction to the flashback sequences, we share Graham's gaze as he drives up, then see him in his car, from the position of what he sees, so that he is made in effect the object of a gaze from the other side, the alien Other of his wife's accident and death. The other instances of humans watching display a similar passivity and objectification under a gaze from elsewhere (often implicitly the television's, as the camera looks back on them watching it).

Human passivity and objectification reverse into an active gaze in the scene where Morgan is threatened. Graham appears to appropriate the point of view of the alien as he sees his own side of the room from the alien's perspective. This active gaze opens the way to Merrill's triumph over the alien, which produces a further, more lasting alteration of perspective. When Merrill knocks the alien down, tipping over a glass of water, we see the alien's death from his own supine perspective, the water that is lethal to aliens pouring down on him from above. In this realization of what has been revealed to Graham through the God's eye view, possession of that view is definitively wrested away from the alien, who is forced to see from another perspective, one that is imposed on him, and which definitively fixes him in death.

The Familiar Signs Restored Following the Elimination of the Alien

If *Signs*' aliens embody interpersonal tensions and a crisis of belief, they are finally narrativized so as to achieve closure. They do not simply disappear from view so that vision is clarified, but are reduced to signs, made to represent a challenge mastered so that family tensions and religious doubts appear to have dissolved.

God, father, son, and television are restored to their expected place (while the wife and mother of the family can be laid to rest, having sacrificed herself for it). The aliens—as potential subjectivity, subsumed into and then eliminated from the human point of view, and as signs, read and discarded—are nowhere to be seen. Seemingly set free by this resolution, the camera arcs across a sequence of views out of windows which it traverses in a continuous movement. From the saved family, it passes to the image of a motionless swing with which the film began. Beyond is a boarded window, then another that frames the cornfield under winter snow. Finally, Graham appears, dressed as a minister again, standing before a wall on which the imprint of a crucifix that was prominent at the start of the film has been replaced by an array of family photos.

This sequence might be one all-inclusive panorama too many. It is most readily thought of as marking a linear passage through time, from Morgan's restoration to the family to Graham's restoration to the ministry. However, its effect is actually to neutralize rather than resolve its implicit complications of time and perception. In this, it is of a piece with the rest of *Signs,* which demonstrates, yet again, the power of film to expose the unstable relations of mutual implication between appearance, point of view, and belief, only to promptly smother this revelation under the overpowering illusion of a coherent "reality."

The detail which disrupts the illusion is the imprint of the cross that was present in the opening scene, yet is absent in the conclusion. We would expect to see it restored with Graham's faith, but instead the wall has been painted over to remove its imprint. This suggests that Graham does not recover his faith, that the man who once hung a cross on his wall now needs his family photos in sight. It might imply a humanization, except that the photos, having taken the place of the

cross, can be considered a sign of it, which is how Graham has all along regarded his family: as a sign.

Like all of M. Night Shyamalan's characters, Graham ends up morally reconfirmed but psychologically unchanged. His obsessive determination to "see" as if he were his God, to fix the meaning of everything so as to confirm his belief in that God and in himself, is what precludes our viewing the concluding sequence as framing a series of possibilities that remain open, just as it precludes alternative conclusions to the narrative. For instance, Colleen's exhortation to Graham to "see" might have been answered by Graham's ceasing to look for signs of his faith and instead seeing what is in front of him: his family. More fundamentally, Graham's need to identify himself in the God's eye view precludes his realizing that what might support the coherence of a reality that remains open is the unbound, and therefore unknowable, gaze of God on it.

Graham cannot accept being the object of such an unknowable gaze. He cannot face the nonsignifying presence of the radical contingency which takes a loved one from him and brings the unknown to his front door, though this is not inconsistent with faith, only with *his* faith. He can only see this contingency erupting as the alien and incomprehensible, so that his faith must frame a world which constantly betrays intimations that everything might be other than it seems, and finds in this no occasion for insight but only cause for a paralyzing anxiety which must be projected onto some objectified Other.

Signs' aliens may be expelled from the world because humans read the signs of their hostility correctly, or they may remain alien because of signs of openness which humans do not read. We cannot be sure, because the signs which determine the film are not those offered by the aliens, but those Graham chooses to think he has received from God. He chooses the signs of a world in which anything that does not already have a place is alien, and so finds himself continually reconstructing the same world in which whatever appears alien will remain so. As the world itself is, at least initially, alien to us, it must remain for him a series of signs read without understanding.

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Abstract *Signs*' alien invaders appear from alternate, and not entirely consistent, perspectives distorted by ex-minister Graham Hess's compulsive memory of his wife's death, the schematic interpretations of the media and, finally and definitively, the indiscriminate systematizing of Graham's abruptly restored faith, which reduces both the aliens and his wife's death to signs from God.

Book Reviews

Generation Multiplex

The Image of Youth in Contemporary American Cinema

By Timothy Shary. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002. $60.00 cloth; $24.95 paper.

Timothy Shary's book is a worthwhile study of teenagers in American film in the years 1980-99 despite a host of methodological problems. The first difficulty is the name of the genre to be studied—should it be "teenager films" or "teen films" or "teenpics" or "youth films"? Shary chooses "youth films," following *The Moving Image Genre-Form Guide* (1997), a publication of the Library of Congress. But "teenager" connotes difference and tension with the adult world, whereas "youth" is a more neutral sociological term. In a contemporary America dominated by identity politics, no one thinks of himself or herself as a "youth." Most writers on this type of movie have therefore chosen some variation of "teenager" or "teen."

The difficulty of naming is symptomatic of a broader problem affecting Shary's book, and most cinema books. What audience is being addressed, and (therefore) what level of discourse is appropriate? Shary tries to craft *Generation Multiplex* as a book for both scholars and enthusiasts. He begins with genre theory and literature review (the book was once a dissertation), and puts together a scholarly classification scheme of genres, subgenres, and subsubgenres. But most of the book is taken up with readily accessible discussion of the plots and themes of well-known teen films. The double discourse of the book is most obvious when one juxtaposes the theoretical introduction with the "Subjective Superlative Lists" (e.g., "Most Enjoyable," "Most Bizarre," "Most Unexpectedly Intriguing") that constitute Appendix B. The lists are an interesting way to get at the subjective component of film study, but they don't solve the problem of a supposedly "complete" and accurate analysis which is strongly inflected by the author's likes and dislikes.

Schary admits that he "initially developed an overambitious set of 'rules'" (257) to describe teen films, an orderliness that he later struggles to overcome. I was particularly struck by the division of the chapter "Youth in School" into subheadings based on the five archetypal characters in *The Breakfast Club*: nerd, rebel, delinquent, popular kid, jock. This rule is probably less interesting than its variations, exceptions, and transformations, and indeed Shary spends much of his chapter exploring those things. But perhaps a more flexible and skeptical theory to begin with might have enriched this part of the book. Flexibility could be pursued in two directions: the idea of genre as a more contingent and changeable construct, and the portrait of high school as more varied than the five archetypes allow. In terms of the second possibility, mainstream teen films such as *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* or even *American Pie* present characters that do not fit *The Breakfast Club*'s archetypes.

Then there is the matter of comprehensiveness. Shary repeats more than once that it is important to see *all* the films in a certain genre and/or time period, or at least as many as possible. But this drive toward comprehensiveness seems to be only a preliminary moment of analysis, for Shary does not propose any quantitative methodology—no counting, no charts. Instead, he analyzes the more important films at length, giving the others only passing mention. So comprehensiveness may be a useful way of getting a feel for the "universe" of teen films, but it yields to a moment of selectivity—to his credit, Shary admits that this moment is subjective. An alternate strategy which Shary does not mention is canon formation. By looking at films that audiences like and critics respect, one can find most highlights of the genre and engage in a dialogue with viewers and other scholars. But Shary specifically rejects audience analysis, and he is more likely to quote individual film reviews than broader overviews of the teen film.

So what is there to like about Timothy Shary's book? For one thing, the methodological tangle is made explicit and offered up for the reader's inspection. I learned a lot from Shary's discussion of the difficulties of writing about teenagers and film, even when I disagreed with him.

Generation Multiplex is also a good reference work on teen films, despite some unevenness. The "Youth Horror Film" chapter is an excellent discussion of themes and ideas, largely because here Shary has a wealth of fine scholarship (by Carol J. Clover, Robin Wood, and others) to draw upon. By contrast, the long chapter "Youth in Love and Having Sex" lacks a striking interpretive framework, but is useful for its thematic typology and its discussion of individual films. One way to read the book is to jump around from chapter to chapter, focusing on favorite subgenres and on films that one knows and likes.

Shary's conclusion is worth pondering. He takes a positive and supportive view of the images of youth in 80s and 90s Hollywood films: "American youth films in the late twentieth century depicted a generally diverse and most often positive image of teenagers. In most cases, youth are portrayed as stoic, resilient, strong, inquisitive, hopeful and/or creative" (258). Other authors have seen a more limited thrust to the genre; for example, Jon Lewis proposes that "The cultural function of the teen film has always been primarily one of reassurance,"[1] and Thomas Leitch suggests that teen films circa 1990 are about valorizing the teenage world and resisting the adult world.[2] I am impressed by both the Shary and the Lewis/Leitch positions. Therefore, although Shary has not convinced me of the preeminence of his views, he has defined one pole of a potentially fruitful debate.

Peter Lev is the author of *American Films of the 1970s*. He teaches at Towson University.

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Notes

1. Jon Lewis, *The Road to Romance and Ruin: Teen Films and Youth Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 151.
2. Thomas Leitch, "The World According to Teenpix," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 20.1 (1992): 43-47.

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Masculinity

Bodies, Movies, Culture

Edited by Peter Lehman. New York: Routledge, 2001. $85.00 cloth; $22.95 paper.

Offering 17 new essays on the male body and its popular representations, Peter Lehman's collection contributes to an already thriving field which has seen important works by Kaja Silverman, Gaylyn Studlar, Richard Dyer, and a seminal anthology by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, to name only a few. As Lehman's introduction puts it, a new study dealing with masculinity and popular culture will no longer have to answer the question, "Who needs it?" However, such a study might have to consider what it has to contribute to a firmly established field. In this regard, the authors of the collection place a determined emphasis on the importance of the multiple intersections between race, ethnicity, and sexuality in the study of masculinities. And this even carries over into the structuring of the anthology itself. Lehman notes in his introduction that the essays are not grouped into formal categories (e.g. "race" or "queerness") to avoid "the implication . . . that essays are easily contained in those groups," instead stressing the "interconnectedness" of all of the inquiries.

It is possible to note certain methodological similarities between a number of contributions which forge a sense of this interconnectedness. Krin Gabbard is among the theorists who employ a rigorous textual analysis to further an understanding of white sexuality. For Gabbard, the furious anger of Mel Gibson's character in *Ransom* (1996) is symptomatic of a "displaced" racism, allowing the audience to identify with his paranoid masculinity against a black hypermasculinity which the film carefully discredits. Also employing close textual analysis, Susan White examines the pleasures and threats of looking at the white male heterosexual body in the 1947 film noir *T-Men*. Ultimately, White's most interesting points are made in many of her more digressive passages, such as a historical discussion of "the Great Masculine Renunciation" of sartorial splendor, which finally becomes a means of distinguishing ethnic or racial difference from a more subdued "Anglo aesthetic."

Other essays begin from a textual analysis foundation and open out into more diverse territory. Lucia Bozzola's essay explores the ways in which Warren Beatty's star discourse has enlarged the meanings of his films as well as how aspects of his personal life have directed the focus of his later efforts, with their concentration on a male sexuality more exclusively defined by "love" and monogamy. Taking a look at another seductive male body, Chris Straayer's essay on the treatment of the character of Ripley in Patricia Highsmith's novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) and director René Clement's 1960 adaptation *Purple Noon* concludes that the former is the more "poststructuralist" in endorsing an unfixity in contrast to the film's emphasis on determination with regard to class, gender, and sexual identity. Straayer's piece provides a crucial link to the post-World War II moment in which the lack of physical traits to distinguish gays earned them a deviant identity threatening to American "normalcy" similar to the fear of Communist infiltration, but which also, paradoxically, marked them as "identity-less" to straight society, triggering a still active "heterosexual panic" around the inability to address the difference between gay and straight.

Other essays in the collection place an even greater emphasis on the social and historical contextualization of the artifacts being investigated. In his essay on World War II combat films, Robert Eberwein argues that earlier interpretations of the war film are often totalizing or ahistorical in viewing all male displays of vulnerability and affection as "feminine and/or homosexual" coded forms of behavior that are validated in suffering and death. Eberwein turns to period discourses such as army training films, documentary war photography, and Hollywood cinema to present a much more nuanced and negotiated relationship between war narratives and male sexuality. In this relationship, we do see the recurrence of intimate male physical contact, but the U.S. Government's self-admitted "risks" and anxieties surrounding the possibilities that these images suggested and symbolized also required the reaffirmation of heterosexuality and manliness through a multiplicity of narrative strategies.

Examining American masculinity during a very different war, Dennis Bingham uses the backdrop of Oliver Stone's bio-pic *Nixon* (1995) for a wide-ranging discussion in which he argues that Nixon should not be viewed as an aberration of the 1970s but as a figure of "compulsive manhood," defined by a constant drive toward self-betterment and control. One of the lengthier pieces in the collection, it is stocked with moments of keen insight (e.g., Bingham's personal revelation of "masculinity as a massive fabrication" coming during the years of Nixon's presidency). But the essay is also *over*stocked with an array of sections tackling topics that finally do not connect up in any meaningful way: a discussion of the differences between the "historical" Nixon and *Nixon*'s Nixon; an extended psychobiography of Oliver Stone; a careful look at the film's editing design. . . . This essay, while a useful inclusion, could perhaps have benefited from a more activist editor.

Also taking on the 1970s, Sally Robinson draws a connection between the male liberationist movement of the decade and the novel and film versions of *Deliverance* (1970 and 1972, respectively). In Robinson's eyes, the film, often dismissed by literary critics as an inferior copy, actually undercuts the male liberationists' "myth of masculinity" which the novel ends up largely recuperating. While the male

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liberationists' primitivist conceptions of masculinity carried implicit racial connotations, Amy Louise Wood's historiographical essay on the use of photography during lynchings in the post-Reconstruction South directly interrogates the connections between race and Southern masculinity. For Wood, the photos of the lynched black body and the willingly photographed white participants rendered the violence a "spectacle," with the white community ritualistically enacting a performance of racial solidarity and superiority. Wood draws a parallel between this "intensely masculine ritual" and the Southern pastime of hunting, which also typically features photos of men or boys celebrating beside their "kill." Wood sees a reaffirmation of "heroic masculinity" in both rituals, with "sexuality, gender, and lynching" all tightly linked, particularly given that protecting the honor of white womanhood was frequently the pretext for the lynching of the "black beast rapist."

Other essays adopt methods closer to those frequently found in disciplines such as sociology and communications, stressing the quantifiable and classifying films according to various commonalities. Emblematic in this respect is Amy Aronson and Michael Kimmel's essay on the transformation of the Hollywood trope of "masculine redemption." Arguing that feminism and the feminist backlash has of late precluded female characters from acting as the source of a love that changes "a bad man into a good man," Aronson and Kimmel catalog a series of Hollywood films in which it is now "only young children" whose "virtuous innocence" can turn bad men good (*Jerry Maguire,* 1996; *Three Men and a Baby,* 1987; *Made in America,* 1993). A problematic side to the authors' methodology becomes apparent in the systematic flattening of differences between each of their examples. The anxieties surrounding race-mixing and racial passing in the Ted Danson-Whoopi Goldberg vehicle *Made in America* certainly distinguish as exceptional any form of "masculine redemption" found in the film's narrative. Similarly, Joe Wlodarz's essay brings together a grouping of male rape-revenge dramas—*Sleepers* (1996), *The Prince of Tides* (1991), *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Wlodarz makes a persuasive case that anxieties of emasculation and homosexuality overdetermine all these narratives of anal violation, allowing them to conflate male rape with male homosexuality. But it becomes a bit troubling that, in equating each of them as the same sort of "children of *Deliverance*," Wlodarz cannot give much consideration to variations such as the highly self-reflexive and ironic mode of address of a Tarantino film vs. the earnestness of a Streisand vehicle.

Justin Wyatt's contribution, on the other hand, looks at a more restricted group of films and makes a limited but still substantial claim. For Wyatt, although the "male group" films *Swingers* (1996) and *Diner* (1982) are ostensibly "straight" texts and neither presents an overtly gay relationship, ". . . both suggest that homosociality unconstrained by convention can foster a homosexual relationship" (55). *Swingers,* in particular, features the male pair adopting highly coded forms of communication and reveling in surface and style. In the process, the film calls up the aesthetic of camp, which for gay men and the *Swingers* pair becomes about "self-protection" and "negotiating one's way through the world." And for Wyatt, it is in this respect that *Swingers* represents the integration of a form of gay male friendship into straight society.

Slightly diminishing the American-centric nature of the collection is Robert Lang and Maher Ben Moussa's brief but informed take on the 1986 Tunisian film *Rih Essed* (*Man of Ashes*) by Nouri Bouzi. The piece forms a nice twosome with Wlodarz's essay as the film also becomes a male rape-revenge tale, turning on a violation suffered by two boyhood friends which prompts one to undergo second thoughts on his wedding night and the other to be cast out of his family home branded with the stigma of homosexuality. But here, rather than a strategy for the eventual recuperation of a phallic masculinity as in Wlodarz's ultimate evaluation in the American context, the rape is "really only a device (or) means of showing what happens when a young man . . . refuses the sexual role chosen for him by society" (82). The childhood trauma also serves as a counterdiscourse to the unconscious level of desire operative in the text. The film's suggestion that the main character's horror of heterosexuality thus derives from the trauma functions to disavow responsibility for gay desire. At the same time, the presence of a discourse of fantasy creates a space for this desire and a more complex sexuality.

In a sense, it's almost a shame the essays were not grouped into formal categories, as several of them—focusing on the male anatomy and men caught in various stages of undress—could certainly have been bunched together under some sort of witty heading like "Dick Talk" . . . only funnier ("Phallus Talk"?). In this group is the essay by Lehman on what he terms the "melodramatic penis." The essay's foundation begins from the suggestion that male representation is caught up in a polarity not unlike the virgin/whore representation that structures female imagery. For Lehman, the male polarity is structured, on one end, by the powerful spectacle of phallic masculinity and, at the other, by its vulnerable, pitiable, or comic collapse. While the appearance of the "melodramatic penis" might disrupt this polarity, its revelation only at moments of extreme melodrama, such as the infamous scene in *The Crying Game* (1992), still insists on masculinity as something of monumental significance. The essay of perhaps the most methodological significance in the entire collection is Toby Miller's contribution, aptly titled "James Bond's Penis." Eschewing formalist analysis, psychoanalytic theory, or a sociologically influenced approach of classifying and categorizing, Miller instead traces James Bond's relationship to his body by using "mundane, positive knowledges that work with conventional, public truths as commonsense ways of making meaning." Through this approach, Miller is able to pursue the "long, slow" move which made the male body nearly as pivotal as the female body to consumer capitalism, with Bond's character in the "avant-garde of weak, commodified male beauty."

The final essay stands out both as a marked departure and as a fitting conclusion to the anthology. It is by Tim Miller, who is a gay performance artist and frequent leader of community-based workshops which can encompass public performances dealing with men's sexuality. A mostly autobiographical sketch, the essay does contain much theoretical insight. Miller builds on Toby Miller's essay when observing that men's bodies have finally become as "colonized and marketed as women's," but notes that while straight men or boys can "hide behind the bunker of straight male privilege" if their bodies don't "make the grade," gay men do not have this option. Describing the performance pieces in his workshops as about the need to put away the "hegemonic maps" of maleness, Miller offers glimpses of creative narratives of the body which allow their performers to see each other as full of male imperfection. For Miller, this ultimately might lead—for gay men in particular—to becoming a "less colonized male of the species." As Miller's essay suggests, the anthology's usefulness, in the end, is that its contributions do display an "interconnectedness," speaking to each other in a number of interesting ways, while also exhibiting a methodological and topical diversity. Although its slant may be somewhat Americanist and its authors largely interested in Euroamerican subjectivities, it is nonetheless a valuable contribution to an ever-expanding field.

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Wondrous Difference

Cinema, Anthropology and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture

By Alison Griffiths. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. $62.00 cloth; $23.50 paper.

If you've visited a large metropolitan museum lately, chances are you also attended an IMAX or IMAX 3-D movie like *Blue Planet, Africa: The Serengeti,* or *T-REX*. State-of-the-art movie theaters, interactive exhibits, and fast-food chains have become commonplace in museums today—educational and scientific institutions that are rapidly transforming into "edu-tainment" complexes. While this may seem like a recent phenomenon, the convergence of commercial, educational, and recreational components within museums can be traced to the late nineteenth century and the proliferation of new media technologies in the early twentieth century. In *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture,* Alison Griffiths traces this complex history, focusing on the use of early motion picture film in anthropology and museums, and examining the broader significance of visual culture across a number of key educational, scientific, and popular sites. This is a long overdue look at hidden interstices in the history of ethnographic cinema and the trafficking between disparate practices of visual culture in scientific and commercial spheres.

Griffiths' research reveals a rich, if discordant, set of cinematic practices prior to Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) and unearths little-known silent films by anthropologists, travel lecturers, and commercial filmmakers produced during the early twentieth century. With fascinating examples and illustrations culled from a number of international archives, *Wondrous Difference* is an invaluable resource for cinema historians, anthropologists, archivists, and museum professionals. A recent recipient of the Katherine S. Kovacs Book Award (Society for Cinema and Media Studies, 2003), Griffiths' book lays the groundwork for scholarly work in revisioning the history of ethnographic cinema and the relationships between scientific museums and sites of public and visual culture.

Griffiths' command of this subject matter is impressive. The book is based on her dissertation (which won the Society for Cinema Studies dissertation award in 1999) and published articles that represent her focused research over the past decade. She incorporates an array of archival materials to illustrate her arguments—photographic and film collections, graphic materials, and ephemera (e.g., exhibit brochures, program notes, and advertisements) that situate practices of visuality within broader scientific, aesthetic, educational, and commercial contexts. A prime example is the cover illustration, "Dancing Tarairui Indians," painted by artist Albert Eckhout in 1614. At first glance, one might think this inappropriate for a study of early cinema and anthropology. However, Griffiths' choice is purposeful in terms of how she locates cinematic practices within histories of representational practices—iconographic scenes of native dance and performance, modes of spectatorship, and precinematic forms of cultural display. In this instance, she illustrates how the return gaze of male dancers and female bystanders in Eckhout's painting draws attention to representation itself as a form of ethnographic encounter. The idea of transcultural encounter surfaces throughout the book and serves to critique notions of the colonial gaze, opening up the study of visual culture to alternative forms of looking, reciprocity, and indigenous agency. In various sites of encounter, Griffiths illustrates how producers, subjects, and audiences were (and are) actively involved in a dialectical process of exchange, interaction, and meaning-production across the porous boundaries between science and popular culture.

For anthropologists and cinema historians, the significance of *Wondrous Difference* is that it situates early ethnographic films in a wider historical trajectory of visual and exhibition practices in museums and sites of popular culture. Rather than isolating ethnographic film practices, Griffiths systematically links their development to other forms of visual practice, including museum displays, world fairs, and anthropological and commercial photography. She convincingly argues that early ethnographic cinema cannot be properly analyzed without considering how related representational practices were simultaneously situated in institutional, educational and popular domains. In particular, she

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emphasizes throughout how the science of anthropology and museology emerged within broader exotic and commercial displays.

Perhaps this volume's most valuable contribution is its sustained focus on the tensions and contradictions between scientific and popular discourses. In several chapters, Griffiths explores the paradoxical status of the visual in anthropological thought and practice. One of her chief concerns is the question of why anthropologists did not readily adopt the motion picture camera as a research and recording technology in the early decades of the twentieth century. As she illustrates, cinema proved a double-edged sword for anthropologists and museum curators, with its appeal to scientific verisimilitude and its concurrent ties to commercial forms of amusement and recreation. Griffiths goes beyond previous discussions about the financial and technological constraints of ethnographic film production to examine the strained (and occasionally complicit) interactions between anthropologists, museum curators, commercial photographers, filmmakers, and entrepreneurial showmen. It is her contention that anthropological images and the ideological meanings they generated were imbricated within the broader circulation, commodification, and reception of visual culture and exotic imagery. She assumes a thoroughly pragmatic view about ethnographic meaning in this regard, arguing that it does not simply reside in the textual or formal qualities of visual images, but was/is generated and embedded within sites of exhibition and viewing contexts.

In Part I, Griffiths focuses on natural history museums (specifically the American Museum of Natural History in New York), world's fairs, and photography as pivotal sites in the production of precinematic and cinematic modes of ethnographic display. As she illustrates, museums were central in the professionalization of anthropology and developed exhibition practices that resonate in modes of early ethnographic cinema. Through detailed analyses, Griffiths establishes formal and spectatorial links between museum life groups, ethnographic villages in world's fairs, native performances in Wild West shows, and anthropological and commercial photography. This section provides the historical and theoretical foundation for early ethnographic cinema and the construction of a modern museum spectator through exhibit design, looking relations, issues of corporeality and nudity, spatial and temporal dislocations, and forms of mobility, travel, and consumerism.

The author shows how ethnographic meanings were produced through a dialectical process as anthropologists and museum curators drew upon popular culture to make anthropology palatable and entertaining, and illustrated lecturers and commercial photographers drew upon discourses of anthropology to legitimize their productions as authentic and educational. For example, anthropometric photography and commercial forms of photography (e.g., postcards) constructed ethnic or racial "types" that circulated in both scientific and popular realms, reproducing evolutionary paradigms and similar narrative tropes. In another example of the continuities between visual practices and the significance of viewing contexts, Griffiths argues that the prevalence of the long take and lack of on-screen movement in early ethnographic films (partially a factor of limited technology) invited a more "contemplative gaze" on the part of audiences, similar to that of viewing still photographs (119-21).

While reassessing the canon of ethnographic film is not Griffiths' primary objective (xxx), her research on the use of motion picture cameras by early anthropologists constitutes a unique and critical contribution to the history of anthropology and ethnographic cinema. In Part II, Griffiths establishes Alfred Cort Haddon and Walter Baldwin Spencer as important figures in the history of ethnographic cinema through their use of motion picture cameras in the field. She argues that the professionalization of anthropology and the privileging of the written text led to a "diminution of interest in the visual," a paradigmatic shift that remains "an enduring paradox in the history of visual anthropology" (128-29). In her discussion of several short films by Haddon and Spencer, she illustrates how ethnographic cinema, with its visual excess and proliferation of meaning, presented anthropologists and audiences with new challenges and a discursive field that differed in many respects from photography. One of the most innovative aspects of this section is Griffiths' attention to the "haptic" (tactile or sensory) qualities of cinema, which she suggests may have threatened the scientific status of early ethnographic cinema. She also argues that the absence of an intellectual framework discouraged anthropologists from adopting the motion camera as a scientific tool. Nevertheless, the fact that several early anthropologists wrote for popular as well as scientific audiences (e. g., Spencer screened his films as part of illustrated public lectures) demonstrates the intertwining of anthropological discourses with popular culture and the commodification and circulation of visual images in broader contexts of display.

In Chapter 5, Griffiths examines the earliest motion picture films of Native peoples by Thomas Edison, Edward Curtis, and Joseph Dixon in the American West and travelogue filmmakers Lyman Howe and Burton Holmes. Here, the notion of filmmaking as a cultural encounter figures critically through staged performance and dance (what she calls the "presentational approach" [186]), the return gaze, the camera as "celebrity," and the interplay between cinema, tourism, and virtual travel. Most intriguing are her discussions about questions of authorship and authenticity in the travelogue genre and the appropriation of anthropological discourses by film lecturers and cultural impresarios. Many of these polemics surface in later travel and expeditionary films, illustrating important continuities in visual practices and technologies throughout the twentieth century. Looking at travelogue films as colonial propaganda, Griffiths illustrates how popular travel cinema participated in the construction of racialized others and the formation of national identities within the United States.

In Part III, Griffiths returns to the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) and examines the integration of motion picture film in educational programs and illus-

trated lectures—a process fraught with ambivalence and contention. She illustrates the role of curators in censoring and editorializing the work of popular lecturers and filmmakers as a way of establishing the museum's scientific authority and conferring authenticity on these materials. Explorer-adventure filmmakers like Paul Rainey, who screened his film *African Hunt* (1912) at the AMNH, epitomize the uneasy conjuncture between film lecturer and showman, a notable exemplar of the "precarious equilibrium between science and spectacle" at natural history museums (266). In Chapter 7, Griffiths takes a closer look at the work of early film pioneers in anthropology, including Franz Boas, Pliny Earl Goddard, and Frederick Starr. This chapter grapples with issues that remain central to the discipline. For example, as she illustrates, early anthropologist-filmmakers struggled with the difficult task of producing films that were both educational and appealing to popular audiences. Critically, Griffiths' attention to issues of authenticity, salvage ethnography, and preservation, coupled with cinema's proclivity for mimesis, record-making, and repeatable viewing, envisions early links between filmmaking and archival practices within the history of ethnographic cinema. Despite this flurry of activity and archival sensibilities, Griffiths concludes that the motion picture camera was not widely adopted in anthropological research during the first few decades of the twentieth century. She attributes this to limited technology, lack of formal innovation in cinematic techniques, and the fact that, for most anthropologists, film never proved a viable alternative to the ethnographic monograph.

Griffiths also provides contemporary examples to show that the legacies of these historical visual practices are very much with us today. She concludes with works by indigenous filmmakers which illustrate how complex the ethnographic encounter has become and how it now increasingly draws upon and engages with the historical record of visual representation in countless archives. Her attention to the much-heralded films of Marlon Fuentes (*Bontoc Eulogy,* 1996) and Victor Masayesva (*Imaging Indians,* 1992) illustrates the contemporary reworking and resignification of archival footage in different political projects. These are just two examples of how historical footage has been used in creative ways to recuperate indigenous histories and revision issues of subjectivity, self-determination, and cultural representation. Clearly, this volume breaks new ground in situating the emergence of early ethnographic cinema amidst anthropological science, museology, and popular culture. However, the complex historical and discursive terrain through which Griffiths leads her readers also needs to be recognized as part of a paradigm shift in studies of visual practice. In this sense, Griffiths is working within a new tradition of scholars approaching visuality with a historically integrated and culturally critical perspective. If *Wondrous Difference* leaves us with a single message, it is that cinema, photography, and other forms of representation need to be treated as part of a larger complex of visual culture that is grounded in multiple institutional, disciplinary, social, and political contexts. The masterful way in which Griffiths navigates and reveals the complexity of these relationships sets a standard for others to follow.

Amy J. Staples is currently a fellow at the Human Studies Film Archives, Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution.

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Book Note

Contributor: **Wheeler Winston Dixon** is the James Ryan Endowed Professor of Film Studies and Professor of English at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln.

Golden, Eve, with Kim Kendall. *The Brief, Madcap Life of Kay Kendall*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2002. Almost forgotten today except by the most devoted aficionados of British comic cinema, Kay Kendall was an incandescent starlet who briefly rose to fame in the film *Genevieve* (1953), and then, in 1959, poised on the brink of genuine stardom, died of leukemia at age 32. Think of a more direct and aggressive Audrey Hepburn, and you've almost got it. Kay Kendall brought to her life, and to her screen roles, a vivacity and abandon that carried her admirably through the hardscrabble years on her way to the top. Working her way up the studio system ladder, Kendall made a string of modest programmers for Ealing, British Lion, and Hammer before her surprise breakthrough with *Genevieve*—a modestly budgeted film for Rank that no one expected much from. She went on to star in *Doctor in the House* (1954), another Rank production, which co-starred her friend Dirk Bogarde; the film was so wildly popular that it spawned a long-running and highly profitable series. The next year, Kendall, now a proven box-office draw, starred in *Simon and Laura* (1955), a prescient comedy about a fictive "reality" television show featuring the destitute, perennially feuding husband and wife team Simon and Laura Foster (Peter Finch and Kendall), masquerading for public consumption as the ideal couple. Toward the end of her life, Kendall fell in love with Rex Harrison, and the couple married, but Kay's fatal illness was soon diagnosed.

Her last film, Stanley Donen's *Once More With Feeling!* (1960), was released posthumously, and for most of the world her "sudden" death came as a considerable shock (Kendall had not been told of the seriousness of her condition and believed all that was ailing her was pernicious anemia). Eve Golden, with Kay's sister Kim, has written a life of Kendall that is admirably brief and devoid of sentimentality, and shrewdly accurate in its assessment of her work as an actress. Although most of Kendall's films are no longer available—even 16mm and/or 35mm prints are hard to come by—Golden offers us a tantalizing glimpse into the inner workings of 1950s British cinema, and at the same time documents the interrupted life of an actress whose career and life were both cut short far too soon.

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